

REJECTED WOLF PACK BOOK 2



MARKED
FOR THE
PACK

TRACI LOVELOT

Contents

Contents

[FREE Novella](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Book 2: Marked for the Pack](#)

[Author's Notes](#)

[Chapter 1 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 2 - Flint](#)

[Chapter 3 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 4 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 5 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 6 - Gage](#)

[Chapter 7 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 8 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 9 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 10 - Heath](#)

[Chapter 11 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 12 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 13 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 14 - Gage](#)

[Chapter 15 - Heath](#)

[Chapter 16 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 17 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 18 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 19 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 20 - Gage](#)

[Chapter 21 - Flint](#)

[Chapter 22 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 23 - Heath](#)

[Chapter 24 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 25 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 26 - Gage](#)

[Chapter 27 - Heath](#)

[Chapter 28 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 29 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 30 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 31 - Gage](#)

[Chapter 32 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 33 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 34 - Gage](#)

[Chapter 35 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 36 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 37 - Freya](#)

[Chapter 38 - Gage](#)

[Untamed Shifters](#)

[What's Next](#)

[Mel's Vampire Coven](#)

[Our Fae Queen](#)

[Snowed in with Shifters](#)

[About Traci Lovelot](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Copyright & Attributions](#)

FREE Novella

Get *Snowed in with Shifters* FREE!

When an early winter storm leaves us stranded, there's only one bed... And three sexy wolf shifters to share it with me.

But wolves mate in pairs.

When the snow finally thaws, will any of our hearts survive?

To read the free wolf shifter novella with guaranteed HEA, subscribe to Traci Lovelot's emails at:

so.TraciLovelot.com/readnow

Dedication

For those who lost their way. May you find a new, entirely unexpected, and delightful path forward...

Book 2: Marked for the Pack

They promised to protect me during my heat. But are any of us ready for what happens afterward?

With my old pack hunting me down, a friend and I embark on a desperate plan to keep everyone we care about safe. Along the way, I'll discover secrets about my past and whether I have any hope of ever shifting.

My alphas protect me on my journey, even though I didn't ask them to. But it's a good thing, because my heat hits sooner than any of us expected... and with the worst possible timing.

There's no denying Flint and I have something real — something that might outlast my heat.

Heath used me and discarded me, so why do I keep catching this longing look in his eyes?

And when Gage's secrets are finally revealed, we might discover what's between us is so much stronger than hate.

I keep thinking like a typical wolf shifter, expecting to choose just one of them as my mate.

But I'm not just a wolf, am I? What if... instead of one, I'm falling for them all?

Marked for the Pack continues right where *Protected by Outcasts* left off. A high heat series containing hints of dubcon, *Rejected Wolf Pack* features a female wolf shifter who must discover the secrets of her past. By the end of the series, Freya will bring all her alphas to heel and get her Happily Ever After.

Author's Notes

Welcome back to Traci Lovelot's world of wolf shifters!

Dear reader, I'm so thrilled you're back to spend more time with Flint, Gage, and Heath. Since you read the [first book](#), I'm sure you know what you're getting into, but, just in case, here's a heads-up about this book:

Special content warning

Marked for the Pack contains trauma, intrusive thoughts, references to previous abuse, post-traumatic stress triggers in Chapter 22, threats of sexual violence, tons of graphic reverse harem style consensual sex, as well as a non-consensual mark and dubcon throughout.

Freya will come to belong with her pack, but please be kind to yourself if you need to skip this series.

Discover the kinks, tropes, and triggers from all my series on my website at:

www.TraciLovelot.com/tropes-triggers

Book 1 recap

Last time, in *Protected by Outcasts*, [Book 1](#) of Rejected Wolf Pack by Traci Lovelot:

After Luka, the alpha heir of the **Ironwood** pack, rejected Freya as his fated mate, he exiled her to the wildlands to die. Flint saved Freya and brought her to his small pack of outcasts, the **Howling Echo**, where they both learned that Gage, his pack alpha, despised female wolves and wouldn't let Freya join the pack.

When they found out Freya was going into heat, triggered by finding her fated mate, Gage struck a deal with Freya: the Howling Echo would protect her if she spent her heat with them.

After Heath and Flint killed some Ironwood wolves who were hunting Freya, the small pack took refuge near a town of rogue wolves called **Alloy**. With nothing to do but hide out, Freya provoked Gage into making good on their deal, and Gage punished her for it in a way she equally hated and enjoyed, denying her climax until she agreed to let Heath and Flint watch.

Later, they arranged a job to meet up with drivers from the **Snow Moon** pack to pick up a delivery for the **Moonblessed** pack. When the Howling Echo arrived with the delivery, the Moonblessed alpha pair threw a party in their honor, which became a matchmaking event to get Freya to choose a mate before her heat begins. At the party, Heath's former lover, Tork, called out Freya for already having a fated mate. She was forced to admit in front of everyone that her fated mate rejected her.

While at Moonblessed, Freya made friends with Flint's ex, Shante, who believed Freya might be part witch. When the Ironwood pack showed up at the gates, demanding Moonblessed hand over Freya, Shante convinced Freya to seek out the witch of the woods. So, the two women fled into the wildlands, accompanied by the Howling Echo wolves...

Chapter 1

Freya

“Let’s do one more circle this way,” Shante suggested, leading me around a briar thicket before we doubled back yet again at a brisk pace.

After my confession about not being able to shift, Shante had stayed in her two-legged form. Fortunately, I still had the better-than-human strength, speed, and endurance of shifters... though that alone wouldn’t be enough to escape the wolves who were hunting for me.

Between the Ironwood pack and the rogue alphas who would be drawn by the scent of my impending heat... Well, we were lucky we hadn’t run into trouble so far, but it was only a matter of time. To lead my enemies astray and keep Ironwood from attacking Shante’s pack, we wove a complicated scent trail through the wildlands.

Luka, my fated mate, had rejected me, but his Ironwood pack warriors had traveled all the way to Moonblessed pack territory to reclaim me, promising pack war. According to my friends Wilder and Willow, Luka’s father, Pack Alpha Jameson, was planning to have me publicly executed. That was the only way to satisfy Nira, who wouldn’t marry Luka until his fated mate — me — wasn’t a threat.

Once I was dead, Luka and Nira could mate and marry, solidifying the alliance between two powerful packs — the Ironwood pack I’d once belonged to, and the Frost Fang pack that the Howling Echo wolves had once belonged to.

I glanced over my shoulder to see the three wolves loping silently behind me, their sling bags across their chests. I’d

tried to break our deal and leave them in Moonblessed territory to protect them, along with the whole Moonblessed pack. When Flint had followed me anyway, I'd tried to break his heart by rejecting him, thinking that way he'd be safe. The Howling Echo was too small to take on the Ironwood pack, especially if Frost Fang joined the fight.

Instead, all three of them had followed me out of Moonblessed. Now that they knew I couldn't shift, all three had stayed in a form I couldn't argue with. As wolves, they could understand me, not that they listened. I'd told them to go back several times, to no avail.

A crescent moonmark decorated the forehead of the dark brown wolf whose coat ended in light gray forelegs. That was Flint. The largest and most dominant wolf of the three, Gage, had the typical dark gray coat along his head and upper back that faded into white along his sides and down his legs, along with having a white muzzle. Farthest back trailed Heath, a silver-white wolf with gray dusting throughout his coat.

As wolves, the three of them could outpace and outlast our stamina. After several hours on the run, my feet and legs grew tired, and even high-energy Shante was starting to wane. To think I'd imagined I could survive several days alone in the wildlands while leading the Ironwood pack on false trails.

"Are we getting close?" I asked Shante when we slowed to a walk through some of the tougher terrain we'd crossed. Shante had promised to lead me to a witch who was half witch, half wolf — a hybrid, just like Shante suspected I was.

"After this circle, I'll lead us straight there," she promised.

"Can the witch of the woods shift? Or is she like me?"

She was a hybrid, just like Shante suspected I was — half witch, half wolf. But was she also stuck in human form and disgraced in the eyes of wolf society?

"She can shift, and I hope she'll help you figure out how to bring out your wolf, too. And I should warn you not to call her a witch to her face."

“Why not?” I stepped over a fallen log, wishing I could switch into wolf form like everyone else. Most wolves shifted for the first time in their teens, but not me.

“Because she’s technically a mage. Just as wolves form packs, witches join covens. Mages operate alone and refuse to participate in witch society.”

“So their lone wolves are called mages.”

“Exactly. They would never admit it, but witches are a lot like wolves. Just as we consider rogue alphas to be dangerous for lack of a pack hierarchy, witches consider mages dangerous since they’re not in a coven.”

I nodded my understanding, absorbing the information. In the Ironwood pack, I’d heard very little about what other peoples were like, aside from wolf shifters.

Shante went on. “Most witches would never lower themselves to doing business with wolves, but since Brielle is a hybrid...”

Flint’s ears perked up as he kept pace at my side.

“Is she a mage by choice, or did they cast her out because she’s a half-breed?” I wondered if she had suffered the way I had.

Shante shrugged a shoulder. “Never told me. But it’s clear she doesn’t feel she belongs in either wolf or witch society.”

Her words struck me hard. Was that the life I’d be doomed to as well? Living alone in the wildlands, never finding a place among wolves nor witches? It might be better than being rankless in the Ironwood pack, but it still wasn’t the kind of life I wanted.

I slowed down so much that Shante turned around and came back. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound so bleak.”

She tugged me against her in a hug, and when I looked over her shoulder, three wolves stared back at me, their gazes intense.

“You won’t end up alone like Brielle. You already found your place — with the Howling Echo pack.”

That's when I realized that I still had a few secrets I hadn't shared with Shante. Sure, she now knew I couldn't shift. And maybe she'd even noticed my lack of a pack mark, but I'd never outright told her the Howling Echo hadn't actually claimed me as their packmate.

Maybe it was because I was in a weird mood, or maybe coming back into the wildlands made me feel bold, but I looked directly at Gage's wolf, the largest of the three alphas, when I answered her.

"I'm not so sure about that, Shante." I returned her embrace. "I think at least one or two of them hate me."

My eyes darted over to Heath's silver wolf. The first and only time we'd had sex alone together, he'd forced me to come without making a sound. Then he left without a word afterward, making me feel used and discarded. On the other hand, Gage simply didn't like female wolves. Though I was curious about what had caused Gage's hostility, Heath was a true mystery.

Shante's body trembled, and I realized she was laughing. She pushed me away, her hands on my shoulders, her expression incredulous.

"Hate?" She jerked her chin toward the three wolves. "If that's hate, I damn sure want to know what love looks like."

The snapping of bones drew my attention, and suddenly Flint stood naked on two feet, his sling bag across his chest. Compared to the other two, he had a slender build, but hard muscles rippled as he pulled the sling bag off.

I was helpless to look away, watching his reverse striptease. His biceps bulged as he dragged his jeans on, and his long, black hair fell nearly to his bellybutton, temporarily veiling his gorgeous physique. My eyes devoured his smooth, flawless skin, a much richer color than mine.

I surprised myself with a growl, stepping between Flint and Shante, who quickly turned her back.

"Broken up, remember?" she chuckled.

My mind knew nudity was common around shifters, and that Shante and Flint had parted ways permanently, but my wolf felt differently. And even though I'd rejected him, my heart still wanted him.

Finally, he slipped on his colorfully beaded moccasins, one of the many hallmarks that showed he followed in his ancestors' footsteps.

When his dark eyes met mine, the intensity — and the hurt — in them made it hard to hold his gaze. It didn't matter that I'd said those things to protect him. What kind of fool rejected an alpha like him?

"None of us hate you, Freya," he said in his low, raspy voice.

Maybe it was because his voice sounded like he'd just rolled out of bed, but my mind helpfully supplied memories of the last time we'd shared a bed together, and my heart ached to go back to that day. I got lost in his eyes, taking comfort in the assurance he offered as his gaze heated.

Shante coughed. "We better keep moving."

"Right," I agreed, feeling awkward because all the wolves, even Shante, could smell my arousal.

My upcoming heat allowed us to leave better false trails for Ironwood, so I tried not to feel too chagrined about it.

As we started walking again, Flint kept Shante between us, and I tried to keep my cool. His demeanor made me wonder if I had ruined things after all.

Why had he chosen now to shift back? When I thought back to what Shante and I had been talking about, I realized I'd come dangerously close to admitting I wasn't actually part of the Howling Echo. Had Flint shifted back to keep me from telling her about our deal?

They'd promised to protect me up to and through my heat, as long as I let them do whatever they wanted with my body. My cheeks heated just thinking about some of the things we'd done together.

I'd started to think I might be able to find a place in their pack, but Heath had made it clear that I shouldn't mistake camaraderie for acceptance. Flint might have developed feelings for me, but the other two clearly hadn't. To them, I was their plaything. And that was before I'd thrown Flint's affection, respect, and compassion back in his face. It was probably a matter of pride that they held up their side of the bargain.

Then I noticed Flint had pulled a phone out of his sling bag. I suddenly felt foolish for thinking he'd shifted because of me when he held it up to his ear. He couldn't use a phone in wolf form, now could he?

Even from here, I heard Hugo's commanding voice on the other end of the line. "Are you safe?"

"Safe enough," Flint replied. "Shante's with us. We're making false trails in the wildlands."

"We'll delay them as long as we can."

Flint caught my eye, and I realized I'd made some kind of sound. I'd left to lead Ironwood away from the Moonblessed pack. If they sacrificed anyone on my behalf, then—

"No," Flint answered. "Tell them we fled. You don't need to be involved in this."

Without waiting for an answer, Flint hung up.

"Don't do anything stupid." He whispered it like a prayer.

"Idori will make sure Hugo sees reason," Shante assured us both.

"I hope so," I sighed. "No one should get hurt because of me."

Shante frowned as if disappointed by my response, then said, "We're nearly there."

"It's best not to sneak up on her," Flint warned. "We should make noise as we approach."

Shante chuckled and held up her phone. "I mean, I gave her a heads up when I shot her a message."

We crossed a small clearing, leaving me feeling weirdly exposed. I glanced up at the sky as though expecting helicopters to reveal my location to the Ironwood pack. Which was silly — they were a large pack, but not particularly rich or powerful, and helicopters were not in their arsenal. Still, my inner wolf felt better once we found ourselves back under the cover of trees.

Ahead, I spotted a sturdy, one-story log cabin with modern roof shingles. A single window faced us, and paving stones led to the front door.

“Freya...” Flint started.

I turned toward him, and the longing in his eyes had me tearing up. I hadn’t wanted him to follow me into danger, but I’d reject him again if it would keep him safe. All the same, my hopes rose at the sign that he still wanted me. I wish the moon goddess had blessed us as fated mates instead of sticking me with Luka.

“Come inside, hybrid girl,” a melodious voice called from the open front door. “Alone. We don’t have all day.”

Chapter 2

Flint

My mate had rejected me in the middle of Moonblessed packlands for anyone to hear.

To my inner wolf spirit, her words meant nothing. He wouldn't believe it until our wolves faced off and she growled, warning me away. Unfortunately, Freya's wolf wasn't ready to come out yet, though Hugo, the Moonblessed pack alpha, had given us all hope that she would, eventually.

Her wolf was in there. We all sensed her.

And now, to hear Shante talking about how Freya might be half-witch? It would explain so much.

Those who followed the ancient ways respected witches and mages much the same way our ancestors had respected the medicine people of the tribe. They knew things about the unseen that the rest of us didn't. They understood the secret workings of the world and the spirit realm better than anyone. And that knowledge gave them power.

Using our pack bond, Gage, Heath, and I had discussed what to offer the wise woman in return for her help as we followed Freya and Shante. We'd all left Moonblessed with hardly any possessions to speak of, which left us precious little to bargain with.

"Shante," I began. "We brought nothing to trade that she would value as payment for..."

Shante waved me off. "I already told Brielle I would bring her some supplies the next time I come." She raised an eyebrow. "You know, when I'm not in such a rush."

My moonbeam looked a little chagrined. “Thank you, Shante. You’re a true friend.”

Unwilling to leave the mage waiting, Freya entered the cabin.

“Thank you,” I echoed as we waited outside. “We will find some way to pay you back when we return.”

“You better,” Shante grumbled. Then she laughed. “Come back to Moonblessed, I mean. I want to see all of you again, alive and well. I like Freya.”

Ours, my wolf jealously insisted.

In my deepest heart, I knew Freya hadn’t really wanted to reject me. She wanted to protect me. And the stubborn, amazing woman was so determined to protect the whole town that she’d planned to run out into the wildlands alone again.

From the moment I first saw her stab that rogue alpha to when she stood on that ridge alongside me to watch over my packmates, I’d recognized Freya’s courage.

But Freya’s fearlessness might be her downfall unless she would let us protect her. The scent of her oncoming heat would draw unwanted attention within the day.

I turned to look at my packmates, and Gage gave me a wolfish nod before the two of them took off to scout in a wide perimeter. Shante and Freya had left enough false trails to keep Ironwood confused for days, but we couldn’t be too careful. Especially considering the other threats within the wildlands.

“You look like someone broke your heart,” Shante observed, drawing my attention.

It had been a long while since we’d amicably parted ways, but my former lover still knew me well enough to read my expressions.

“That’s because Freya did,” I admitted. “And now she’s walked fearlessly into the mage’s den.”

Shante scoffed at my rueful tone. “You want to keep her ignorant of what she truly is?”

I shook my head. “No. I respect Freya. I recognize her courage.”

Maybe getting answers would make her realize she couldn’t deny the connection between us. Her fated mate had rejected her, so I saw nothing else keeping us apart except Freya’s refusal to accept our protection.

“But I care about her and want to keep her safe.”

Shante’s expression softened. “Tapping into her magic side could help with that.”

“Learning about the spirit realm, about directing the unseen forces of the world... That’s not something you learn overnight,” I pointed out. “Ironwood is coming. They won’t wait around for her to finish lessons.”

My former packmate sighed. “You’re right.”

We fell into companionable silence. I’d once belonged to the Moonblessed pack before the wolf spirit within me felt called to join the more nomadic Howling Echo pack instead. That didn’t change my friendship with Shante, however.

In unspoken agreement, we both drifted closer to the mage’s cabin so our sensitive wolfish hearing could pick up what they were talking about — it didn’t sound overly promising.

After a moment, Shante murmured, “She can’t stay here.”

I nodded. “She can’t shift, her heat’s coming... We need to get her as far from here as we can.”

“So, what’s your plan?”

Gage, Heath, and I had considered and discarded plenty of plans while we followed along behind Freya and Shante. One thing was for certain — we wouldn’t let Ironwood catch up to her. Gage and Heath had every intention of dragging her away, kicking and screaming, if that’s what it took to protect her.

At this point, I wasn’t above such caveman behavior myself. My wolf spirit and I valued my mate’s safety over everything. It would be for her own good.

I answered Shante, “We’ll take her out of state.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You have the funds for that?”

Gage and Heath might not want to admit what motivated them, but I knew their wolves must also consider Freya their mate. Why else had they dropped everything to follow her into the wildlands right alongside me?

When Pack Alpha Hugo had mentioned Freya could be a special kind of wolf that shifted later than most, it all but confirmed my suspicions. Freya could have multiple mates.

Shante still waited for my response, so I pushed that revelation to the back of my mind. What mattered right now was keeping Freya safe. The rest would work itself out later.

“Gage is smart. He has stuff stashed all over the place. And Heath is always planning something. The Howling Echo pack has allies everywhere, near and far. There’s half a dozen places we could take her.”

I didn’t mention the part where, eventually, we would run out of cash. We were never exactly well off to begin with, and if we didn’t find new, lucrative jobs soon, we’d be little more than rogue alphas ourselves.

“Good,” Shante breathed a sigh of relief, as though I’d outlined a watertight plan.

I appreciated that she trusted me and the rest of the Howling Echo, but we still had a lot to figure out.

An acrid, unwashed scent caught my attention, and I turned my head, shifting slightly to allow my wolf senses to come to the fore. The repugnant stink of an unfamiliar alpha filled my wolfish nostrils, and I growled.

It could be an Ironwood scout, here to bring the rest of his pack down on us, but I hoped it was just a solo rogue alpha.

Shante’s eyes widened when she noticed the wolf-like snout pushing forward from my face. Then her expression twisted as she, too, caught the scent I’d picked up.

“Stay here,” I growled.

If Shante refused, I would bark an alpha command to keep her safe. But the beta nodded her head, trusting me to do what needed to be done. I removed my clothing, shifted, and silently prowled away, following the disgusting scent trail. I wasn't surprised to find him closing in on our location.

Chapter 3

Freya

The inside of the mage's house looked nothing like I expected. She invited me into a perfectly normal kitchen. A stainless steel oven and a mismatched white refrigerator, perfectly normal cabinets, and wooden countertops surrounded an ordinary dark wood kitchen table and chairs.

Scars crisscrossed the mage's hands, and her long, red hair fell in braids down her back. She didn't seem much older than me, perhaps in her early thirties, but with a quiet energy that spoke of self-confidence in her capabilities. She wore a simple, indigo blue tunic shirt over gray leggings and fluffy purple slippers.

She chuckled when she caught my expression. "You were expecting a cauldron?"

I couldn't help but grin. "And a few bats as carrier pigeons. My name is Freya."

"Freya. A powerful name from a goddess with powerful magic." Her uncanny green eyes glanced me up and down. I swore I saw lightning in them before she turned toward a cabinet. "Tea?"

"Sure," I said, taking a seat at the table as she put two mugs of water into the microwave.

"My name is Brielle." Her silken voice wrapped around me like an enchantment. "Like you, one of my parents was a wolf shifter, and one was a mage."

"How can you be so sure I'm the same?"

"You're a wolf, aren't you?"

“Everyone says so.”

Brielle nodded as though it was obvious, then passed me a mug and joined me at the table. She bobbed her tea sachet up and down in the mug a few times. The moment felt normal and domestic, not like I was sitting across from a powerful mage. Until her unnatural eyes pinned me to my seat.

“There’s no easy way to say this, my dear. You are double cursed. One curse is old, the other new.”

I gasped. “Cursed?”

“By a fellow witch or mage, betrayed by one of our own.”

Her mouth twisted as if to say, ‘What do you expect?’

“What’s the old curse?” I asked, my heart in my throat.

“That curse is to contain your magic.” Before I could react to that, she continued, “The new one is much more interesting, and complex. It appears the same spellcaster who bound your magic as a child also cursed you with a fake fated mate bond.”

“What... Who... *Why?*” I gaped like a fish out of water. At least she’d waited until I was sitting down to tell me.

Brielle calmly waited for me to gather my thoughts into coherent sentences.

“Why is Ironwood still coming after me if it’s fake? Especially since Luka already rejected me as his mate, fated or not?”

“That I cannot explain.”

They must think it was real, just as I had.

“How and why would someone even do that?” Then I held up a hand, preventing Brielle from repeating herself. “Wait, the why is easy to explain. Considering the night that it happened, whoever did this clearly wanted to ruin any chances of a Frost Fang / Ironwood alliance. And they picked the lowest of the low — me — to do the deed.”

And since everyone thought the fated mate bond was real, Pack Alpha Nira of the Frost Fang pack demanded my death to secure the pack alliance.

“That explains the why, then,” Brielle agreed. “As for the how, the appearance and sensations of a fated mate bond are easy enough to fake. Most shifters wouldn’t detect the difference at first, but it’s easy enough for a witch or mage to sense the residual magic on you.”

That fake fated mate bond had destroyed my life. I’d been disgraced, exiled, and sent to die in the wildlands. I nearly had, too. If it weren’t for Flint...

I glanced toward the doorway where I’d last seen him. How many times had I wished I’d been fated to him instead? But if the fated mate bond was fake, then I was free to mate who I wanted...

“Wait!” Another realization struck me. “Why does everyone think I’m going into heat then? The bond is fake, so it couldn’t have triggered the heat.”

Could the spellcaster also have faked the heat?

Brielle gave me an understanding smile. “I’m afraid your heat is very much real, and it’s likely days away, two weeks at most, if I had to guess. My shifter side senses it clearly, and my mage side sees no duplicity.”

Two weeks at most? She reached forward and placed her hand on top of mine.

“Since you’re going into your first heat out of season, that means it’s for the usual reason — your wolf met her mate.”

I shook my head, my mind reeling from revelation after revelation. I’d encountered several alphas shortly after Luka rejected me. Ironwood’s unmated alphas, the rogue alpha Flint had killed... Could I dare to hope I actually was mated to Flint? But after him, I’d also met Heath and Gage...

Either way, my first order of business had to remain the same, simply based on the timeline — figuring out how to survive from now through my heat.

The Ironwood pack likely wouldn’t believe me about the fated mate bond being faked, especially since I was going into heat. And that very real heat would lead them straight to me. I had learned more about my situation, but I was still in trouble.

“Is there any way to suppress the heat before it arrives?”

“I wouldn’t recommend it, not with your magic also suppressed.”

I sighed. “Yeah, I suppose it would be too much, especially with both my magic and my wolf bottled up.”

“What’s this about your wolf?”

I put a hand to my chest. Lately, even I could sense my wolf’s presence. She was in there. But...

“She still hasn’t shown. Which is why I can’t believe she recognized her mate.”

Brielle’s mouth thinned into a flat line, her eyes glancing me up and down. “This is no curse. I sense your wolf within you. How old are you?”

“I am twenty-four, well past when I should’ve first shifted.”

Wolves always shifted for the first time between the ages of thirteen and nineteen. After I’d failed to shift year after year, I’d eventually lost hope.

Brielle shook her head as though I’d finally presented her with a true puzzle.

“Pack Alpha Hugo of the Moonblessed Pack told me he once met a wolf who didn’t shift until much later, so I’m trying to stay hopeful.” Even though it seemed incredibly unlikely at this point.

Brielle nodded. “I myself have never met a wolf like that.” She gestured toward the front door, “Not that I meet many wolves, period. And if I do, they’re rogue alphas. Not good conversationalists, you know,” she smirked. “Most are practically rabid by the time they show up here.”

Living out here in the wildlands, far from where covens ruled, she probably seemed like an easy target to rogue alphas. The fact she was surviving alone made it clear she was anything but.

“But you could be a special breed, a rare type of wolf...” She eyed me again, as if searching for some other clue she might have missed.

All I could do was shrug. I wasn't sure I dared to believe any of that. All my wishes for my future had been crushed so often before, I wasn't ready to hope my wolf might truly appear.

I was having an even harder time believing I actually had magic. At least I'd felt my wolf inside me before. What did magic even feel like?

“Could the curse on my magic be suppressing my wolf?”

“That's a good question. I suppose it could be possible, but I wouldn't think so.” She paused to think. “No, I imagine if magic was responsible for suppressing your wolf, there would have been yet another, separate curse to do that.”

I grimaced. Bad enough that I was already twice-cursed. “Could you break the curse on my magic? Or perhaps help draw out my wolf?”

I needed some edge to help me survive the next few days playing hare to Ironwood's wolves.

“Sad to say, my dear, both of those are beyond my power.”

“Beyond your power? Or is it because I've offered you nothing in return?” I asked, knowing all too well how the world often worked. If she could help, it would be worth a lot to me.

Brielle chuckled. “You expect me to bargain for your firstborn or some such?”

“Or maybe to send me on a quest to find some magical flower found only in... the Cascades,” I gestured vaguely.

She chuckled. “I like you. Even when your situation is dire, you opt for honesty.”

“I'm tired of secrets. Can you help me uncover a few more?”

“Curse breaking requires multiple witches working in tandem. A coven, in other words. And as for your wolf, you’d have better luck asking one of the alphas you came with. I don’t know any magic that would help, and my own wolf is not an alpha. In fact, we might be less dominant than you. It’s hard to tell.”

“Ah, I see.”

Brielle was just a lone mage. She truly didn’t have the power needed to help, since she didn’t have a coven. And as for my wolf... the Howling Echo and the Moonblessed alpha pair had already tried — even the combined command of five alpha wolves hadn’t been enough to force me to shift. I tried to hide my disappointment, but she could probably tell my hopes were dashed.

As always, I was left hopeless, helpless, and unable to change my circumstances. The only way I’d escaped my fate as the lowest of the Ironwood pack was thanks to them throwing me out. Now I found out I had magic, which might have given me a chance to make my own way in the world, only for that brief flicker of hope to be snuffed out as well.

I numbly took a sip of my tea, then wished I hadn’t. It wasn’t to my tastes at all.

Naturally, the observant mage noticed and took pity on me, reaching over to take back the mug.

“Go back to your eavesdropping friends outside. I’ll come out after I get something ready for you.”

“What is it?” I asked, dreaming of a potion or an enchanted sword I could use to cut down the Ironwood wolves as they chased me.

“Nothing special. But leave me two strands of your long, white hair.”

My eyebrows shot up in surprise, but I did as she’d asked, yanking out two of my hairs straight from my head. Then I laid them across her palm. I’d suffered much worse before, and Shante trusted Brielle, so I did as well.

“Go on.”

The mage shooed me out of her house like an unwanted puppy. It was time to face my new reality as a double-cursed witch/wolf hybrid... who was on the run thanks to a fake fated mate curse.

Chapter 4

Freya

Back outside, I found Shante loitering close to the window, alone. The three Howling Echo wolves were gone.

“Don’t worry,” my friend reassured me. “They’ll be back. Flint... needed to check on something.”

She gave me a crooked smile like she knew exactly what was going on but didn’t want to worry me.

With my emotions in a confusing mess, I couldn’t blame her. “I’m guessing you heard what Brielle told me?”

“I’m a wolf shifter.” Shante smiled and shrugged. “What did you expect?”

The sound of something heavy being dragged through underbrush and leaves caused both of us to turn. Flint hauled the body of a massive grayish brown wolf through the undergrowth by its rear leg. Though he wore pants, Flint’s naked arms and chest were splattered with blood, and I gasped and ran toward him.

“Flint! Are you okay?” I asked.

“Don’t worry.” Shante grabbed my arm, holding me back. “That much blood means the other guy is dead.”

Flint let go of the wolf, revealing a giant chunk of its throat was missing. A trail of blood led back into the forest. I didn’t recognize the wolf as being from the Ironwood pack, which meant he was likely a rogue alpha drawn in by my scent. I shuddered, remembering the first time Flint had protected me. That had been too close for comfort.

“He killed a fellow alpha for you, Freya,” Shante murmured.

“It’s not the first time,” I whispered back.

With fresh eyes, I stared at Flint’s heaving chest, covered in blood. He bent to take the shifter’s sling bag, his arms and shoulders rippling like the predator he was. Then he wiped off his hands and face with the clothing he found inside, followed by his chest.

His eyes shone with pride and satisfaction, glinting gold with his wolf so close to the surface. He always protected me, whether or not I wanted him to. Against rogue alphas. Even against his own packmates.

My wolf was feeling a similar sense of pride — pleased with his ability and willingness to protect. And smug satisfaction that the other female wolf knew he was mine.

Wait. Mine? If I was going into heat because I’d met my fated mate, who wasn’t Luka after all, and the Howling Echo had noticed my impending heat from the moment Flint had brought me into their camp...

“He must be my mate after all,” I whispered in awe.

Shante chuckled. “I would be turned on if my mate killed for me, too. Fucking hot.”

Tears filled my eyes as my entire story rewrote itself in my mind. I wasn’t Luka’s rejected mate at all. My mate had been protecting me from the moment he met me.

“Flint...”

He was still cleaning up when I finally gathered my wits enough to ask a very important question. A question that felt like it might shatter my entire world if he answered it the wrong way.

“When did you first notice I was going into heat?”

He cocked his head like a wolf listening for something in the distance. Then he tossed the balled-up, bloody clothing back onto the wolf’s body, hiding the gruesome wound from view.

His moccasins made no sound as he edged toward me, as though afraid to scare me off.

“Was it before or after you brought me back to camp?” I asked.

I wasn’t sure what I would do if he said after, because that would mean either Gage or Heath—

“Before,” he said without hesitation.

My heart soared, and I rushed forward to throw myself into his arms just as the other two wolves approached. But I had eyes only for Flint.

“You’re my mate,” I told him, reaching up to caress his face.

The alpha smirked, his muscular arms wrapping around me. “I know.”

Then he bent down and kissed me. His lips found mine as though we’d been kissing for decades instead of days. He playfully nipped my lower lip, then soothed it with his tongue, which then sought entrance. I parted my lips for him, squeezing him and digging my fingers into his shoulders like I couldn’t get close enough to him. He cradled the back of my head and plundered my mouth like it was his to take.

Joy filled me — I’d met my mate, and he wanted me, too. The man who’d rejected me was no one to me. My true mate cared about me and always had, from the moment he’d first met me. He had killed to protect me more than once. And he would never willingly leave my side.

It explained everything.

A cough from behind me startled me, bringing me back to myself as Flint broke the kiss. A storm filled his gaze as he stared at me. But we weren’t alone, and now wasn’t the time for anything more. My nose wrinkled when I realized we were still next to the body. Flint’s hand traced my shoulder down to my hand, taking it without hesitation as we turned to face our audience.

Shante grinned at me, and as soon as my eyes caught hers, she winked and mouthed, ‘Hell yeah.’

My amusement at my friend’s reaction dissipated when I turned to face the mage and the other two alphas. To my surprise, Gage and Heath were back in their two-legged forms, fully dressed. Both wore grim expressions on their handsome faces.

Standing at around six and a half feet, the two of them had always reminded me of Viking warriors with their powerful builds and intimidating expressions.

Gage had pulled back the longer top of his undercut hairstyle with a hair tie. He kept a full but well-trimmed beard, dirty blond to match his hair.

Heath was clean-shaven at times, scruffy at others, and his finger-combed dark hair was longer on top, giving him a playboy look. But today his expression was anything but playful.

Brielle held a sheaf of twigs in one hand, bound with twine.

But before she could say anything, Gage gestured with one hand at the dead alpha. “This rogue might have caused trouble for you, mage, out here alone in the wildlands.”

Brielle outright cackled, at last fulfilling one witchy stereotype. “Do you really think so?”

I grinned — it didn’t seem like she was acting. If I could get my curses removed, maybe I’d be as confident about facing down rogue alphas. Flint gripped my hand as though he couldn’t bear to let go of me, even for a second.

“I do,” Gage said, but the mage met the pack alpha’s gaze without reservation.

The moment grew tense. Sometimes I made a conscious effort to behave like a subordinate wolf should, even though I could meet an alpha’s gaze with no problem — just like Brielle was now. Was it because I was only half wolf, like Brielle?

Flint's firm voice reminded me he was just as much of an alpha as his two packmates. "Please accept this as an offering, sparing you the effort of dealing with him yourself. In return, is there anything you can do to obscure our trail and lead Ironwood away from us?"

"Great minds think alike, dear alpha." Brielle turned and handed Shante the bundle of twigs. "I've enchanted this to smell like the scent of Freya's heat. You must lead the enemy away from both Moonblessed and from my home. This you must do for leading trouble to my doorstep."

Brielle retreated into her cottage, and I reached for Shante as she took the bundle of twigs.

"No, Shante. I can't let you take this risk for me."

"As Brielle said, it's as much for her as it is for you, Freya." She gave me a sad smile. "I'm sorry we have to part ways, though."

Brielle returned with a blanket, which she tossed at Flint.

"I just remembered your mate can't shift, and the nights grow cold."

"Thank you, wise one," Flint said with obvious sincerity, even bowing his head at this woman who clearly didn't outrank him on the dominance scale. It puzzled me.

Then Brielle turned back to Shante. "When you are far, far from my house," she fixed her with a stern look, "throw the twigs somewhere that they will burn. The fire will give off Freya's fake scent even more powerfully than these twigs themselves. That will give you enough time to get away, and you can return to your pack where you belong."

"Thank you, Brielle." Shante smiled, and I wondered how deep their friendship went. How had she met the mage to begin with?

So many questions, and not enough time left for the answers. While Shante was busy leading Ironwood one way, I would lead them another and hopefully keep them from catching up with my friend.

“Good luck, Freya. Come back to Moonblessed when you can.” Shante gave me a hug.

When she turned back to Brielle, the witch snapped, and the tips of the twigs caught on fire.

“Show off.” Shante laughed before waving at me and heading away from Brielle’s cottage.

“Come on.” Flint pulled me along with him, the blanket folded over his other arm.

“Stay strong, Freya,” Brielle called to me.

When I glanced over, she carried a second bundle of twigs in her hand, their tips smoking and leaving a trail behind her as she headed in a different direction from me or Shante. That made three different trails Ironwood would need to unravel to find me.

“Thank you, Brielle!” I called after her.

Flint led me into the woods, and when I glanced behind me, Gage and Heath were back in their wolf forms, having not once said a single thing to me. It was impossible to know if they were angry at me — for trying to break the deal or maybe acknowledging Flint as my mate? — or if they were just back to treating me as an inconvenience.

“Having your scent everywhere is drawing unwanted attention,” Flint warned. “I should shift again.”

“Okay,” I said, my mind still whirring from the realization that I’d met my mate, and that he accepted me. I’d rejected him, but he stood by me, anyway.

Flint’s lips ghosted over mine, a promise for later. I leaned into the touch, but he pulled away all too soon.

“Even if you can’t see us, we’re there,” Flint said. “Don’t worry. Just keep heading southwest as best you can.”

At first, the three wolves stayed close, but within a few minutes, they loped off into the woods, each of them in a different direction. From time to time I could hear a branch break, but most of the time, I only heard the usual sounds of birds singing and the breeze riffling through leaves.

Had Ironwood made it to the Moonblessed walls yet? Did they realize my scent was stronger outside the walls than in it? I hoped against hope that they wouldn't attack Moonblessed out of spite.

I wished for some way to inform them of their mistake, to explain that witches were meddling in wolf affairs. Why witches wanted to avert an alliance between Frost Fang and Ironwood, I had no idea, but it nearly led to pack war between Ironwood and Moonblessed, simply so they could kill Luka's fake rejected mate. The thought made me furious at the witches.

Except... I was apparently one of them. Part of me, at least.

I wished I had more time to spend with Brielle and learn about that side of myself, but here I was, back in the wildlands, once more on foot and alone. In every direction stood nothing but tall trees and rocky crags. The mountains ensured I couldn't go far east or west, so it wasn't hard for me to keep going southwest, as Flint had suggested. The treacherous footing kept my attention on the ground right in front of me, so I saw nothing around me... but I heard it.

The sounds of a scuffle came from my left, and my heart lurched with fear for Flint. I knew he would want me to keep going, though, to keep moving so Ironwood wouldn't catch up. So I did, picking up the pace into a flat-out run. While I had daylight, I should make the most of it.

In a few minutes, I found myself forced to skirt around some massive boulders that must've broken off the cliffs centuries ago. As I circled them, snarls and growls met my ears from up ahead, and I stopped short.

Two unfamiliar wolves turned toward me, one with a reddish-brown coat, the other gray and brown. The larger-than-normal wolves stood at chest height on me, which meant they were alphas. My throat closed in fear.

From their positioning, I realized they'd been growling at each other. Just my luck to interrupt their fight before one of

them took out the other. Now they both turned toward me, their noses twitching as they sniffed the air.

I pulled out my knife, the one I'd used before to stab an alpha. That hadn't been enough to kill him, though, so I hoped Flint was nearby to save me once again, because I couldn't hope to survive against two alpha wolves.

The reddish one circled to my left and chuffed a laugh, as if unimpressed by my knife. The other growled at him, as if warning him away.

Without the stability of a pack, rogue alphas were dangerous and unpredictable enough already. The scent of my oncoming heat made each want to claim me for themselves. With no other options, I stood my ground, knowing that running away would only urge them on.

I'd never been so happy to hear growling come from behind me. A glance over my shoulder revealed all three Howling Echo wolves at my back. Gage bared his fangs and let out a short bark. As though waiting for his signal, Flint and Heath rushed to engage the rogues, the wind buffeting me as the massive wolves tore past me.

To my surprise, the two other alphas took off in a run, and Heath and Flint gave chase. Gage stayed at my side, his fangs still bared. The strangest urge to touch him came over me. He'd sent his packmates to kill the alphas that threatened me. No matter what I'd said to him about the deal, he still protected me anyway.

The sound of paws pounding the stony ground caught my ears, and I turned just in time for the reddish-brown wolf to bowl me over. Gage caught him by the scruff and knocked him off balance, but he recovered. The two alphas circled, and when Gage got close to me, he growled and snapped at me, warning me back.

The red wolf took advantage of his inattention to lunge in, but Gage crouched beneath his snapping jaws, and closed his mouth on the rogue's foreleg. Bone crunched, followed by the red wolf's high-pitched wowl of pain.

The rogue alpha fought for his life, but not for long. Gage got the rogue's throat between his powerful jaws and ended it quickly with a shake of his massive head. The wolf collapsed dead before he hit the ground, his reddish-brown fur now bright with blood.

When Gage shifted back to his two-legged form, blood barely covered his face. He'd made quick work of that rogue alpha, but his sky-blue eyes burned when he his glare fell on me.

"Are you hurt?" his low voice rumbled.

I dusted myself off, shocked that the fight had ended so abruptly. Shaking my head, I stared down at the second dead body I'd seen today. Gage rifled through the fallen wolf's sling bag, then wiped his face off on the guy's shirt just as Flint had done earlier.

"We need to keep moving."

Despite his words, Gage closed the distance between us, his large hand moving to cup my cheek. His striking, sky-blue eyes seemed to pierce into me, seeing everything I'd once hidden from him.

"The witch told you Flint is your mate?" he asked softly.

My breath caught. His nearness to me did strange things to my body, making me want to close the gap between us. He'd kissed me once, and I swore I could feel the sensation tingling on my lips right now.

I shook my head. She hadn't exactly said that.

"She told me someone cursed me with a fake fated mate bond. And that the true cause of my heat is because my wolf met her mate."

Gage nodded to himself. "Flint sensed you were in heat before he brought you back to camp."

His words held a ring of finality, as though he'd come to the same conclusion I had.

But his thumb traced my lower lip, and my whole body lit up with sudden desire. It made no sense. If Flint had triggered

my heat, then that meant he was my mate. I shouldn't feel this strongly about another man, should I?

Somehow, Flint had managed to watch Gage fuck me on the kitchen table without losing his mind... not something an alpha would let another alpha do to his mate. Flint also hadn't attacked Heath for having sex with me, either.

Nothing made sense. I wished I'd had more time with Brielle... I had so many questions.

All I knew was that, in this moment, I wanted nothing more than for Gage to pick me up and pin me against the massive boulders behind me. To my surprise, my wolf whimpered internally, as if wishing the same.

No one else had ever stood up for me the way these three did. It made sense from Flint, as my mate, but Gage and Heath also protected me. They'd all killed for me.

No one else had ever cared enough to hurt someone because they'd hurt me. Certainly not my old boyfriend and fellow Ironwood packmate, Wilder. He'd never once intervened when our childhood bullies beat me up.

"You protected me again," I whispered, searching Gage's face for some sign that this was about more than just the deal.

"Always." His gaze slid over my lips with such intensity I could almost feel it. "No one will harm you without going through me first."

Despite my internal conflict, I ached for his kiss, but it never came. When Gage stepped back, every extra millimeter of space between us felt wrong.

"And as for those who hurt you in the past, princess? I'll destroy them all. One day, we'll make both Ironwood and Frost Fang pay."

Chapter 5

Freya

At the foot of a craggy cliff-face, we stopped for the night near an abandoned lean-to.

“The previous occupant has been gone for a while,” Gage observed, sniffing the air. “Still, Heath and I will scout around just to be sure.”

The pack alpha exchanged a glance with Flint, who turned and began spreading out the blanket under the lean-to.

“Come on, Freya.” My mate motioned to me with an open smile. “Let’s get you warmed up.”

“I always wondered why you refused to sleep in wolf form,” Heath mused.

His caramel gaze swept over me with a playful glance and a flirtatious curve to his lips.

“I guess now you know,” I said, confused by his friendly overture.

I couldn’t reconcile flirty Heath with the guy who fucked me in silence and then left me sprawled across the bed without a word.

Heath whipped his shirt over his head before I could look away, winking as he gave me an eyeful of his bulky upper body. I turned my back, refusing to continue gawking at him. I glanced guiltily at Flint and refused to look directly at the other two. Shifters normally cared little about nudity except for specific situations... like this one.

My heat meant that Flint and I must be mates, but he hadn't officially claimed me with his bite. The heat left me vulnerable to being claimed by someone else, a fact that should make Flint particularly possessive of me. But when he lowered himself with liquid grace to the blanket beside me, I found no tension in him nor any sign of concern.

The two other alphas soon shifted and disappeared into the rocky terrain around us. Flint caressed my cheek and pushed my hair behind my ear.

“Are you okay?”

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. “Not really. I'm exhausted and... it's... a lot to absorb.”

Then I looked at him. Really looked at him, with the moonlight through the trees making his dark hair shine. My mate, who I'd abandoned.

“Flint... I'm sorry for saying those things.”

“No, Freya. There's no need to apologize. I'm proud of you.”

“For what?”

“For trying to protect the Moonblessed pack, for one. Few outsiders would do that.”

He leaned forward and planted a kiss on my cheekbone.

“For trying to protect three hard-headed alphas like us. You wanted to protect us like a true packmate would. Few non-alphas think that way.”

His lips moved lower, to just under my ear, his breath heating my neck and making me crave more.

“For facing the facts about your past and who you truly are.”

His praise was making my whole body heat. Distractedly, I said, “She told me that someone cursed me and bottled up my magic. And that same someone also cursed me with the fake fated mate bond.”

His lips traveled lower. His breath flowed beneath the collar of my shirt and down to my collarbone.

“And when we find that someone, you know we’ll do anything to figure out how to free your magic,” Flint promised.

The circumstances had only slightly suppressed my heat-influenced libido, and all his kisses were doing a great job of reawakening it. Brielle had said my heat might still be two weeks away, but with the need I felt right now, I doubted that very much. I’d found my mate, and I was desperate for his touch.

“Flint, you told me once that I should bite my mate back so that we would have an equal mating. Do you still want that?”

I grabbed the bottom hem of my shirt and pulled it over my head, my long hair falling behind my shoulders as I did so. Then I unfastened my bra and let it drop, leaving me bare before my mate.

He leaned back, his dark eyes searching my face. “Of course I do, moonbeam.” His hand caressed my face, and I sensed a ‘but’ coming. “When the time comes, I want both of us to bite each other. I want to feel your fangs at the same time as I bite you in return.” Then his gaze darkened as his gaze fell to my lips. “Preferably when I’m deep inside you.”

Hearing those naughty words fall from his lips made me crave him all the more. But then I replayed his words in my mind.

“I can’t bite you back without my wolf.”

He nodded. “And I won’t claim you now. I fear that my bite might trigger your heat. We can’t afford to stay here for five days and... moving you would be difficult.”

My shoulder slumped, and I suddenly felt like covering myself up. The disappointment hit me in a massive wave. Flint wasn’t rejecting me, he was just telling me we needed to wait. But where my body had once burned with desire for him, it now burned with shame.

Sensing my displeasure, Flint leaned in and wrapped his arms around me, nuzzling his face into my neck. “Resisting is hard enough already, moonbeam. Please don’t give me that look.”

I sighed, wrapping my arms around him in return. It felt good to be here in his embrace, even though we weren’t truly safe here. Not by a long shot.

“Sorry I’m so impatient,” I mumbled into his long, dark hair.

He laughed and trailed kisses along my naked shoulder and neck as he reassured me, “I want my mate to be happy, and I’m glad you finally recognize me as yours. We may not claim each other yet, but for now... we can enjoy ourselves. We’re safe enough with Gage and Heath on watch.”

I must have tensed up, because he pulled back again, once more searching my face. My eyes dropped from his, as was normal in the face of an alpha’s stare. But Flint knew me better than that. He knew I didn’t normally drop my gaze for anyone, alpha or otherwise.

“You can talk to me, Freya. What’s bothering you?”

“I...” Flint had always been so open and honest with me. The least I could do was to repay his honesty in kind. No matter how much it might hurt him. “I thought once I realized you were my mate, things would be more cut and dry. But...”

An unconcerned smile lit his face, and I worried he didn’t understand.

“But you still crave my packmates as well. Not just me.”

I silently nodded, wondering how he could sit there so calmly. His wolf had chosen a broken half-wolf, half-witch hybrid as his mate — a disloyal one, as well.

“My wolf doesn’t mind, nor do I.”

I blinked in surprise, staring at him in shock.

“What... You’re an alpha. Alphas don’t share.”

He shrugged. “You’re different, Freya. I’ve always known it. Maybe that’s why you feel the way you do. I believe that one day, when your wolf makes her appearance, she’s going to choose more than just me as her mate.”

Before I could argue with him, he leaned forward and covered my mouth with his. The kiss was hot and unhurried, and he smoothed his hands over my shoulders as if to reassure me that all was well. That he would wait for my wolf before he claimed me if necessary... and that he would accept it if my wolf choose multiple mates, mind-boggling as that was.

He gently pushed me back onto the blanket, his body covering mine. The weight of him felt so good against me, and I moaned as soon as he pulled back to kiss his way down my body. His hot mouth left a trail of heat down my body in the cold autumn air. When he reached my pants, he pulled them off of me, taking my underwear with them.

Although Ironwood hunted me, I felt completely safe doing this here with him in the middle of the wildlands. He would protect me no matter the cost... as would his packmates.

And now that I knew Flint truly didn’t mind whatever might happen between me and them... I felt freer than ever to enjoy the moment, and embrace what may come.

As soon as he got my pants off, his ravenous mouth began devouring me. I did my best to stifle my moans. Bad enough that the scent of my upcoming heat might lead enemies to us — I didn’t need to help them along with extra clues as to my whereabouts.

I canted my hips up, hoping Flint would take the hint and give me more. But he pulled away and stood up so he could take off his own pants. His eyes raked over me lying in wait for him, his burning gaze so intense it was almost a caress in itself.

“I can’t get enough of you, moonbeam,” he whispered as he settled his weight over me once more.

Nestling between my hips, he nudged the crown of his cock against my wet opening, his eyes questioning, as if he believed I could ever turn him away.

I smiled at this amazing man who gave me more than I ever asked for. Then I wrapped my legs around his hips and used my heels to urge him on. As he pushed into me, stretching me open, we both let out a moan of ecstasy.

I briefly worried about needing to be quiet, but then his mouth came down on mine, and we both muffled the other's cries of pleasure as we drove one another to greater and greater heights. Flint's hand caressed my side, down to my hip, then twisted to press between us. The angle wasn't the best, but he made it work, curving his fingers just enough to push me to even greater heights.

Flint's hips came down hard as I lifted my own, seeking to claim as much of him as I could. No matter what I felt for anyone else, it didn't change how insane with desire this man made me.

What we had wasn't just lust. It was so much more — a terrifying thought that I quickly tried to ignore. I felt him throb inside of me and knew he'd nearly reached the peak.

“Come with me, moonbeam. I don't care who hears you,” he whispered in my ear. “You're always safe with me. With us.”

My legs tightened around him, and he changed angles just slightly to slide so perfectly inside of me.

His fingers twitched against my clit, pulling the words from my lips, “I'm close.”

“That's it. I want my scent on you and your scent on me. I want to hear you coming so hard.”

His words started the avalanche, and soon my whole body was quaking with pleasure. It centered on the point where his fingers met my clit and radiated outward, enveloping my whole body. My head fell back as I moaned, and my hands clawed at his back. I went lower, grabbing his ass and pulling him as deep as I could take him.

He lost it right along with me. When his face fell against my neck, I wondered if he'd forgotten his decision to wait. But as his release flooded me, he only kissed the juncture between my neck and my shoulder.

“Soon,” he promised.

Chapter 6

Gage

While Heath and I scouted the area for potential problems — rogue wolves, Freya’s former Ironwood packmates, or anything else out of the ordinary — we continued to discuss our options for where we could take her with our limited resources.

Heath’s voice echoed in my mind. *“Something tells me we’re going to end up on Midnight Path packlands again.”*

“We can’t go to them every time we’re in trouble,” I growled.

“You just don’t want Astrid making fun of us again.”

Though she wasn’t a wolf, Astrid was the pack alpha of the Midnight Path. She was one of the few women I’d respected before Freya came along and shook up my worldview.

“Or inviting us to join her pack... as her harem,” I reminded him.

“She was drunk.”

“Freya is too close to her heat.”

Heath finished my thought, *“And if Astrid pulled something like that again... Pure trouble.”*

“Exactly. We have enough trouble to go around.”

As if to prove my point, I sensed Flint’s wolf reveling in his mate. To my wolf, it was of no concern. He approved of Flint protecting her and being with her.

So why did my breath freeze in my chest? Why did it feel like my heart stopped beating when her moan echoed off the surrounding rocks?

“Wanna go back and watch?” Heath asked.

“No,” I growled.

“Your wolf’s jealous?”

I didn’t answer, because the answer was no. It was my human side that was jealous.

If I’d been in human form, I would’ve needed to take a cold shower to get Freya’s moans off my mind. Too bad we were in the middle of the wildlands with nothing around for miles.

“We could keep widening the circle,” Heath suggested. *“Look farther afield.”*

“Let’s do it before I do something stupid.”

“Like bite off Flint’s head?” Heath’s mental laugh rolled around in my mind.

Why did I feel so possessive of her? I’d made the deal so we could share her between us, but now that we knew for sure Flint must be her mate, the deal was off. It had to be. Of course, that didn’t change the fact that we would protect her.

I’d promised her, and I kept my word.

“It doesn’t make sense. They’re mates. We all know it.”

“We do,” Heath replied. *“Did the witch confirm it?”*

I thought back to what Freya had told me. *“Only that the fated mate bond was fake, which means her heat is because of finding her real mate.”*

Heath dipped his snout, and his mental words sounded resigned. *“Flint will be best for her.”*

As the pack alpha, I could only sense my packmates’ emotions when they were strong enough. Like Heath’s current sadness entwined with acceptance. And Flint’s adoration and pleasure as he worshiped his mate.

I should be pleased that one of my pack had found his mate. Instead, it was close to torture... like an open hole in my heart that left me bleeding. And I didn't understand why.

I tried to keep my mind on the task at hand — scouting for enemies. If we stumbled across a rogue alpha right now, I welcomed the chance to taste blood, to take my mind off what I could sense all too well through my bond with Flint.

A fight would be perfect for getting Freya off my mind. Even though the pack bond didn't allow me to see what Flint saw, my mind filled in the blanks.

I remembered how hot it had been to see Freya writhing beneath me on that kitchen table back at Alloy.

And then... after she'd run from us and we'd reclaimed her, I remembered watching her wrap her pretty lips around Heath's hard cock while I filled her from behind in the middle of the woods where anyone from Alloy could've heard.

I remembered the way her ass had ground against my erection in the backseat before we showed her our den in Moonblessed.

Now, I raced through the darkness, my paws pounding the rocky ground. My pace challenged Heath to keep up as I tried to do the impossible — outrun my conflicted feelings.

Flint's absolute ecstasy filled the pack bond, and I snarled in frustration. What was the matter with him? It was like he was intentionally broadcasting it. He'd done a better job concealing it when he'd had sex with Freya in Moonblessed. And Heath always carefully kept his dalliances free from the pack bond. The secondhand feedback was uncomfortably arousing as well as frustrating. If Flint was intentionally messing with us...

Before I completely lost my mind, my torment ended. They'd finished, and I sensed Flint's sudden change in emotion as he shifted into his wolf form. I paused, my sides billowing as I panted, and Heath pulled up short beside me.

A few minutes later, I sensed Flint giving us the all clear, and I did the same. We'd found no one. Not a single rogue

alpha for me to take out my aggression on.

Which meant it was time for Flint to answer some questions.

As we approached, Heath chuckled. *“Looks like Flint put her to bed real well.”*

My wolf sensed the rise and fall of Freya’s chest, and her steady breaths told me she slumbered deeply. My nose picked up the obvious scent of her on Flint, and him on her. A scent that was dissipating from him now that the massive alpha wolf stood protectively over his mate. The moonmark in the fur of his forehead seemed to glow in the moonlight.

But the most curious thing was what Heath let slip through the pack bond to me. I wasn’t the only one having emotions for Freya I didn’t want to address. His guilt and desire came across in equal measure.

Which made our predicament even more dire... because she had truly become our greatest weakness. We’d left behind the safety of the Moonblessed pack, totally unprepared, for a stray wolf. A stray wolf who boldly fled to save the lives of people she barely knew in Moonblessed... Along with Heath and me, who might never be her packmates. And of course, the life of her mate, though she hadn’t known it at the time.

For the duration of our deal, I’d sensed Freya’s duplicity. But I’d never for a minute suspected she might not be able to shift.

Knowing the truth about her, about why the Ironwood pack had never considered her good enough, I respected her all the more. She’d spent her whole life being treated like a lone wolf.

Yet she was brave enough to sacrifice herself for the good of others, like only a true packmate should. As I watched her peacefully sleeping, probably dreaming of Flint, my wolf was... content. A swell of pleased satisfaction echoed from that side of me.

Only my human side felt unease.

“All clear?” Flint asked, even though we’d already told each other as much without words.

“Not a soul for miles,” Heath answered.

As I gazed down at the blanket covering Freya, a startling thought invaded my mind and took root in my stomach, making me almost too sick to ask the question.

“Did you bite each other?”

It would explain why my wolf was now content... if he no longer considered her a potential mate but as someone more like a packmate, though we hadn't given her our pack mark yet.

“No,” Flint answered, and I sat back on my haunches, overcome with relief.

Which was stupid, of course, because it was only a matter of time before they claimed each other.

Flint continued, *“I'm afraid that the bite might start her heat... instantly.”*

That possibility should have occurred to me before now. Fortunately, my packmates kept their wits about them. *“That's wise of you.”*

I was acting more like a lovesick puppy than a pack alpha who put his people's needs ahead of his own.

“So, let me get this straight,” Heath teased. *“The mating bite might bring on her heat, but not wild, primal sex in the middle of the woods?”*

Flint chuffed his amusement. *“Hasn't happened any of the previous times,”* he pointed out.

I barked a sharp laugh. *“True, thankfully. It would be difficult for Heath and I to protect the two of you out here during her heat. There's only so many days the witch's tricks will stall Ironwood.”*

As though her subconscious mind recognized my brief laugh, Freya moaned and rolled over in her sleep.

“Gage,” she whispered, and her hand slipped down her pants.

“Her heat might begin soon regardless,” Heath observed across our pack bond.

But my gaze fixed on Flint. Didn't it bother him to know that his mate dreamed of someone else while she slept? A dream that didn't seem very chaste, from the sound of it.

Another of her moans drew all our attention, and I swear none of us breathed until she rolled back over into a deeper — and thankfully silent — sleep.

Flint's mental chuckle startled me, drawing my attention away from his mate.

“What will you do if she goes into heat... and she begs for you?” Flint asked.

I snarled. *“I should ask you that.”*

Flint circled around to Freya's other side, his snout pointed down as he regarded his sleeping mate.

Then he glanced between me and Heath. *“Nothing has actually changed. She was never someone else's fated mate. She was always ours all along.”*

“She's yours,” Heath insisted.

“No.” Flint sat back on his haunches as well. *“Learning that the fated mate bond was fake has influenced her feelings toward me. She thinks I triggered her heat and therefore must be her mate.”*

My confusion mingled with Heath's as we silently stared at him.

Flint continued, *“But nothing explains our feelings toward her.”*

“What do you mean?” Heath's hesitant question felt brittle. As though Flint's answer could break him.

“Remember when I told you I thought Freya was special?” Flint asked Heath. *“Hugo mentioned a wolf that didn't shift until he was twenty-five. Maybe Freya is like that. Maybe she's a different kind of wolf. One that shifts late... and takes more than one mate.”*

It was Heath's turn to bark a sharp laugh, the pack bond filling with incredulity.

"It would explain how three possessive alphas shared one woman," Flint pointed out. *"You both said all along that if she was really my mate, I wouldn't be okay with sharing her with you. But perhaps my wolf spirit doesn't mind sharing her because he already knows the truth... that when her wolf finally appears, she won't just choose me, but all of us."*

Heath shook his head, a strangely human gesture in wolf form. *"You're... there's... I've never heard of..."*

My thoughts had also ground to a halt because Flint said 'all of us.'

"What about Rowan?" I wondered. *"What happens when he returns to our pack?"*

Flint gave the equivalent of a wolfish shrug across the pack bond. *"That's up to her."* He paused, *"And him. Since he was raised by wolves, he might see things differently. I'm not sure Rowan is ready to be loved."*

Heath chuffed a laugh. *"True. But let's build that bridge when we get to it and all that."*

"Even if you're right... And I'm not saying you are," I started. *"She already has a lot to absorb. She's not ready to hear these... wild conjectures."*

"For now, we could just tell her the deal is still on," Heath suggested. *"We're still protecting her, after all."*

Flint got to his paws with the faintest growl, which he sharply cut off when he remembered he didn't want to wake his mate. His next words shook me to the core.

"The real reason you're both so protective of her is because your wolves know she's your mate... our mate. You can hide behind the deal for Freya's sake if you insist. But you can't hide from your own packmate."

The moonmarked wolf took a step forward, staring us both down as his voice echoed in our minds.

“I know you both, and I sense the truth in the pack bond. You’ve let slip much more than you realize. You both want her just as badly as I do. You want to bite her, to claim her, and to be claimed by her. I see it, and eventually, so will she.”

Chapter 7

Freya

When we rounded a steep, rocky slope, two days later, my eyes fell on a highway winding along the mountainside below us. I knew little about the geography of the area, so it surprised me to see such a wide road. Then again, I'd never been so far from Ironwood packlands.

“Finally, we can get out of here,” Heath grumbled, dusting off his shirt.

We carefully picked our way down the slope across treacherous loose rocks, losing sight of the highway thanks to trees and wayward boulders.

The Howling Echo had killed two more rogue alphas and a beta lone wolf who hadn't backed down, even when confronting three growling alphas. It made me think my heat must be close.

The next time we got a clear view of the highway, Gage called, “Meet me down there.”

He ripped off his clothing, leaving it and his sling bag behind in his haste to shift. Then he charged down the steep slope, sending loose rocks flying. My heart was in my throat when I caught sight of the bus barreling down the highway, and Gage's path on course to intercept it.

I grabbed Flint's arm. “It's going to hit him!”

Heath's lips curled up, and I swear he almost looked excited by the prospect. “Only if the driver doesn't stop.”

“Don't worry, moonbeam, Gage knows what he's doing,” Flint reassured me.

Heath's caramel eyes danced with mirth when he turned toward me. "Gather up his clothes, little wolf."

I grumbled as I bent to do as he ordered, but when I picked up Gage's shirt, I stopped short. Without thinking, I brought it to my nose and took a deep inhale. My entire body heated with desire as I caught Gage's heady scent.

I noticed Heath smirking at Flint, and my face heated for an entirely different reason. Feeling awkward and ashamed of myself for reveling in another alpha's scent right in front of my mate, I stuffed the rest of Gage's things into his sling bag before pulling it over my shoulder. It settled low across my stomach, made for someone with a much broader chest than mine.

For a moment, I imagined what it might be like to wear a sling bag because I could shift at will, whenever I wanted to. That must be what true freedom felt like.

The screeching of brakes shattered my daydreaming.

"Gage!" I screamed, every instinct forcing me to run downhill.

My wolf went wild inside of me, doing her best yet failing to come out and aid me. I went way too fast on two legs down the steep slope, but nothing could slow me down right now.

"Freya, wait!" Flint called.

When I caught sight of the bus through the trees, I breathed a sigh of relief. The bus hadn't pulverized Gage. Instead, he stood stock still in wolf form, only a foot in front of the massive bus.

"What the hell was he thinking?" I slowed down to something less than breakneck speed.

"He was thinking that interstates and public transportation are neutral territory, overseen by the Federal DOT so no one species can control them." Heath answered, his tone poking fun at me for being worried. "Our ticket out of here."

Heath hadn't been on my good side in a while, and this only solidified my annoyance at him. But I still asked, "What's

the DOT?”

“Department of Transportation. They wouldn’t want one of their precious interstate buses getting damaged this far out in the middle of nowhere,” Heath answered.

“He knew the risk.” Flint’s fingers wove between mine.

He steadied my footing as we navigated the steep drop-off from the slope to the shoulder of the highway. Together, the three of us approached the Howling Echo pack alpha. Gage shifted back to two legs just in time for the bus driver to come out and berate him.

“Idiot shifter, what the hell was that about, huh?”

I stared in shock when I noticed the bus driver barely came up to my waist. He had long, drooping earlobes, and the short, greenish hair on his head looked much more like... moss?

“Is that a...” I whispered to Flint.

“One of many fae species,” he whispered back.

The fae man’s uniform seemed so out of place against his skin, which was pale with a moss green undertone. But instead of green eyes like I’d expected, his shone with an eerie lilac color.

Gage stared down at the little man. “We need a lift.”

“You couldn’t wait at the bus stop like everyone else?” the driver grumbled. “I don’t suppose you have any clothes, either?”

My surprise at seeing the little fae had stolen my attention. But at his words, my eyes involuntarily shifted to Gage, and I couldn’t help but ogle all the naked skin on display. Even his back was muscular, with his waist narrowing down to deliciously round buttocks. Muscle on muscle broadened his already wide shoulders. And his powerful thighs...

“Laura here has his clothes, don’t worry,” Heath called, pointing at me.

I blinked at the fake name before quickly realizing his intent. If anyone on the bus blabbed to the Ironwood pack

about an unmarked wolf with pure white hair, they could be on us in a matter of days. Best not to make it even easier by identifying me by name.

Then I stepped forward with a smile plastered on my face. “Right here in his —*my* sling bag.”

Gage strode to me, making it hard for me to find a safe place to properly avert my gaze. When we were around outsiders, I had a part to play as a packmate of the Howling Echo and a shifter who could actually shift. No subordinate wolf would meet her pack alpha’s gaze for long.

Instead of taking the sling bag from me, Gage towered over me, then cupped my cheek and ran his thumb over my lips, as he was so fond of doing. I tensed, wondering what Flint would do. Then I recalled his words from a few nights ago... *My wolf doesn’t mind, nor do I.*

Gage did a reverse striptease, his eyes burning into me the whole time, as if daring me to look away from his sculpted body. From his dark gaze, I knew he’d decided the deal was still in effect, despite what I’d said back in Moonblessed.

“Sure, take your time,” the little fae called. “Not like the rest of us have somewhere to be.”

As if his words prompted the bus’s passengers, someone called out the window, “Get out of the way, already.”

The bus driver hopped up the stairs, and I stifled a smile as he climbed up a wall as tall as he was in order to take his seat. Gage followed him aboard, making the stairs look tiny in comparison. Flint went next, pulling me along by my hand, and Heath brought up the rear.

Once aboard, I turned to find an entire bus full of passengers staring at us. A few empty seats were scattered around here and there, and I squeezed Flint’s fingers.

There were whole families on board, and not all the passengers were shifters. One family shared matching amber eyes, but they were my height or taller and had long, pointed ears. I had to assume they were some other type of fae. One of them had long, flaming orange hair that deepened in color

toward the tips, while the other two ranged from indigo to purple.

Gage tromped down the narrow aisle ahead of Flint, and I could spot which few passengers were wolves by the way Gage growled at them as he passed, and the way they all averted their gazes. He was one of the most dominant wolves I'd ever met, and their inner wolves instinctively sensed it, too.

The bus started rolling before we found our seats. Some seats faced backward so that passengers could gather in groups for the long journey. Gage stopped at one such section and growled, "Move."

"Fucking wolf shifters," a girl with dyed purple hair grumbled.

Since I could see her brownish roots, I had to assume she wasn't a fae. She got up and headed for another open seat in the back.

Once the other passenger had vacated the spot, Gage's broad frame filled the seat beside the window. He sighed, facing the front of the bus as if he'd been waiting for his stop this whole time. His wide shoulders crossed into the tiny seat beside him, so Flint and I took the seats facing him, which meant we faced backward.

Instead of crowding Gage, Heath smirked down at me, then scooped me up from my seat.

"Heath, what the hell?" I growled as he sat down with me in his lap beside Flint. My mate winked at me.

"You thought I wanted to sit with that big lug?" Heath laughed. "When I could have you in my lap?"

His playful smirk was like a magnet, drawing my gaze down to his lips. Lips I had yet to kiss. I swore I felt myself getting wet just from the thought.

Shaking my head, I forced myself to remember I shouldn't want to kiss Heath, anyway. Flint was my mate, and Heath was an asshole. Judging from what I'd overheard in Moonblessed about him, I was just one of his many

playthings. Of course, he didn't care about me. To him, I was just a fling, a passing fancy until my heat ended.

Flint smiled over at me as though nothing about this arrangement bothered him. Gage was busy texting away on his phone, though I knew the battery was well on its way to dying after days in the wildlands, even with keeping it mostly off. Heath's big hands slid around my hips, drawing me closer to him, until I was resting against his hard chest. He was cuddling me like I was his girlfriend, someone who actually mattered to him.

I took a deep breath and decided not to make a scene in front of these people, who seemed to mind their own business. As a rankless wolf in Ironwood, I'd gotten used to appeasing more dominant wolves, and this time was no different.

To think about something other than the presently awkward circumstances, I spoke in a voice low enough for only the Howling Echo to hear — I hoped. “I had no idea there would be so much travel between states... by so many different species.”

“There's always someone looking for a better life, little wolf.” Heath's mouth hovered close to my hair, and his chest expanded as he inhaled my scent. I became hyper aware of every time our breaths synched up.

“We'll get off at the next stop,” Gage announced. “We have... friends coming to meet us.”

Flint nodded, as if he knew exactly who his pack alpha was referring to.

I twisted to look at Gage. My pulse was only now returning to normal after the panic he'd caused by intercepting the bus.

“Gage...” I started, then realized it would be stupid of me to look like I was berating my pack alpha.

Anyone who observed such behavior would know something was up. So I changed it to a question at the last second.

“Why did you run in front of the bus like that?”

His intense, sky-blue gaze bored into me, seeming to soften for the briefest of moments before hardening again when he glanced between Heath and Flint. “Because I would never ask my packmates to do something I was unwilling to do myself.”

“Gage is so hard-headed, the bus would’ve sustained more damage than him anyway,” Heath whispered into my hair.

It seemed his playfulness was back, and I didn’t know what to make of it. Or Flint’s lack of concern about it. Or my body’s responsiveness to the proximity. Feeling something hard pressing into my hip, I knew Heath was getting just as turned on as I was.

Why was my body betraying me like this? I wasn’t sure I believed Flint’s idea that my wolf might choose more than one mate. Especially when I wasn’t sure I would ever actually shift.

But if Flint had been my true mate all along... I remembered the night Gage had bent me over the table, while Flint clenched his fists and watched. I remembered when Heath had carried me back to the cabin and Flint had caught the scent of both of them on me. And the way he’d held me the night after Heath had his way with me.

I’d always heard that an alpha would go insane if someone so much as looked at his mate the wrong way. I knew Flint cared about me, but he wasn’t behaving the way I expected a mate — especially an alpha — to act.

He said his wolf didn’t mind my interest in the other two. I struggled to believe that, as a formerly rankless and currently packless wolf, I could deserve one alpha, let alone more like Flint was suggesting. But... if Flint was my true mate, only he should have turned me on. Yet here I was, in Heath’s lap, my arousal inappropriately surging.

I felt a flash of shame when Heath murmured into my hair. “Whatever you’re thinking about...” He took a deep inhale, his hard chest expanding against me. “I’m glad all the other shifters on this bus are subordinate wolves. Otherwise, your siren song of a scent would start a fight right about now.”

He was right. Thinking about all my sexual experiences with the three of them had gotten me all hot and bothered. And his husky voice so close to my ear only fanned the flames higher.

I did my best to think of darker things to calm down my raging libido. Which wasn't easy with a rod of steel pressing into my hip, constantly calling my attention back.

By the time the bus came to a stop, I still didn't have any answers, and I couldn't very well ask the guys anything in front of an audience and potentially jeopardize our safety.

Half the passengers piled out of the bus, and Heath set me on my feet. When another man's eyes fell on me, Heath stepped in front of me with a growl. "She's ours."

"Alright, okay. Can't blame a man for having eyes, you know?"

And then, to my absolute shock, Heath grabbed my hand and pulled me down the aisle behind him, growling at anyone who so much as glanced my way. Passengers of every species disappeared down the street or headed off into various buildings.

"It's a mixed-species town, too?" I blinked.

"It is," Flint said, taking his place at my side.

A human-looking shop owner invited the willowy family of amber-eyed fae to peruse her wares on the front porch of her shop. The three adult fae towered over her, their pointed ears sticking out from their shiny, straight hair.

I took Flint's hand, but Heath didn't let my other hand go, leaving me awkwardly standing there holding the hands of two men. Even stranger still, it didn't actually feel all that wrong. No one even gave us a second look.

"Did you know most fae don't mate in pairs like wolves do?" Heath remarked, his eyes on the fae family.

When I looked closer, I realized one child accompanied three adults. That proved nothing, though. I assumed one of them was an aunt or uncle... until the three of them started

holding hands just like we were doing. They soon disappeared inside the shop, taking my curiosity with them.

“Heath, go get supplies,” Gage ordered, oblivious to our conversation as he stared at his phone. “I’m off to negotiate a place for us to stay and get our next job lined up. We need to keep our heads above water until we can go back to Moonblessed.” He leveled a gaze at Flint. “Keep her safe.”

“Of course.”

Was it strange that I felt bereft when Heath dropped my hand? He headed one way down the street while Gage went the other. My spirits fell until Heath glanced over his shoulder as though he could feel my gaze on his back. He grinned and gave me a saucy wink, looking smug as he kept walking.

I instantly felt like an ass when I turned to find Flint’s loving gaze on me. Before I could say a word, however, his lips descended on mine. His kiss was slow and sensual, but cut short when the bus let off an angry hiss as it left to continue its journey.

He grinned and tugged me in the direction Gage had gone. “Come on. If we stick to this side of town, we’re less likely to run into other wolf shifters.”

I sighed. “I feel bad for continually messing up your plans. That’s why I wanted to do this alone.”

“I’m yours, moonbeam. You’d have to be a lot more convincing to leave me behind.” He grinned down at me, then his expression faltered. “And as far as the others are concerned, the deal is still on, so they’ll do whatever it takes to protect you.”

From his expression, I judged he must not be thrilled about that.

“But, I thought... now that we know we’re mates...” I took a deep breath, then asked, “How do you feel about the deal?”

His eyes roamed over my face. “Doesn’t really matter, does it? How do you feel about it, moonbeam?”

A confused laugh escaped me. I thought I knew how I felt about it. But after sitting on Heath's lap... and after the way Gage had acted after protecting me from that rogue alpha the other day... I wasn't so sure anymore.

Maybe if Flint had agreed to claim me, things might be clearer, but until then, I still belonged to all three of them. And... I didn't hate that idea, even though I felt like I should.

"Three hot alphas to see me through my heat?" I forced a chuckle. "Some would call that a dream come true. But, if you're my mate, then... I shouldn't..."

Flint was amazing, and he should be enough for me. But with him thinking my wolf would choose more mates than just him? It sounded too good to be true, even if I still wasn't sure where I stood with either Gage or Heath.

His expression was far too knowing, making me want to apologize for... what? Heath had pulled me into his lap. Gage had come onto me after protecting me. None of those were actions I'd taken. But my reactions to them...

"I want you to have whatever you want, moonbeam," Flint whispered against my lips so no one else could hear. "I told you I don't mind."

Then he squeezed me close and trailed his lips over my earlobe.

"I always want you to be happy and protected. My mate should have anything she desires. Anything."

"And you're sure..." I felt vulnerable saying it here, in the middle of this bustling street. "Gage and Heath taking advantage of the deal... doesn't bother you?"

He growled. "Only if they do something you don't like."

I nodded, knowing exactly what he meant. He'd seen how distraught and closed-off I'd been after having sex with Heath. I had a feeling both of us were still angry at him about that.

But as for Gage... I couldn't deny how much I wanted him to tease and torment me again and again, making me come

over and over like he had before. My knees grew weak just thinking about it.

Flint sucked in a breath, chuckling as he did so. “That’s exactly what I want you to smell like when you’re with us.”

Chapter 8

Freya

Gage arranged for a house on the outskirts of town, and Flint and I were the first to arrive. When I saw it had only two beds, I cozied up to Flint and said, “I vote you and I share a bed.”

Flint grinned and kissed my forehead. “And let Gage and Heath fight over the other?”

“Exactly.” I returned his grin.

Or they could always share... I smirked at the mental images that thought provoked. They were both large, strong alphas with might-makes-right attitudes. I would definitely watch that, whether it was fucking or fighting for their fair share of space on the bed.

Flint looked out the window at the slope leading up to the peaks above. “No doubt Gage will have us taking turns standing watch. You might end up sharing that bed with them while I’m the one on watch.”

Liquid heat pooled between my thighs at the thought of Gage taking Flint’s spot beside me in the middle of the night.

Flint’s expression heated, his nostrils flaring. “Clearly it’s no hardship.”

Before I could reply, we turned at the telltale sounds of boots clomping up the short flight of stairs to the front door. Flint instantly put me behind him, his knees slightly bent, his moccasin-covered feet directly under his shoulders, his hands free at his sides.

“Help me bring all this shit in, would you?” Gage grumbled as the door fell open. Boxes and bags loaded down his arms, and he rolled his eyes at Flint. “It’s me.”

“You could’ve announced yourself through the bond.” Flint lunged forward to catch the topmost bag falling out of Gage’s grip.

I took it from him as Flint helped unload Gage’s arms. He’d bought a few groceries — mostly sausages, frozen hamburger patties, and pork chops. I explored the kitchen while putting everything away. Sparse cooking implements littered the near-empty cabinets, but it would have to do. Beggars couldn’t be choosers, after all.

“You had money for all this stuff?” I blurted, before thinking better of it.

Gage’s narrowed eyes met mine, and I wondered if I’d upset the pack alpha by implying he couldn’t provide for the pack.

“I called in a favor.”

Before either of us could say more, we all heard another set of footsteps coming up to the front door, but this time Flint opened it with a flourish. Heath wasn’t as loaded down with bags, but close.

“Clothing delivery!” Heath announced with a wide smile. “I’ll want a shower before I put on any of the new stuff, though.”

“There’s only one bathroom and the hot water tank looks tiny,” Flint warned. “We’ll have to set up a shower rotation.”

“Fine. I’ll keep my old clothes for now.” Heath dropped a couple of bags on the only chair in the kitchen. “Boring jeans and Henley shirts for the men of the house.” Then his caramel gaze turned molten as his eyes swept over me. “And something sexy for the lady.”

He pulled out a long-sleeved dress. It seemed long enough on the leg not to be too revealing... or so I thought until Heath raised an eyebrow and flipped it around to show the back opened all the way down to the waist, if not farther. Yet the

thought of wearing it in front of the three of them filled me with... excitement. I wanted to feel their gazes devouring me.

“Expecting to take her out somewhere fancy?” Gage snorted.

“If the mood strikes. We can always take it with us for later,” Heath shrugged, unperturbed by his pack alpha’s disapproval. “But now that I know you can’t shift, I also got you something much more practical.”

He yanked out the dark-colored contents of another bag, and from the sound of it, I could already tell it was winter gear.

He held up the long-waisted coat. “For all the snow we’re bound to see this winter.”

I searched his gaze, trying to figure him out. What had happened to the dangerous Heath who had fucked me senseless, then left me without a word? The angry, broody man who’d barely spoken to me since then?

He’d been replaced by playful, flirtatious, friendly Heath, the one who had once told me I didn’t have to hide my scars. The one who carried me to the bath and noticed when I wanted privacy without my saying a word. The one who showed me how to shoot a rifle and contribute to their job.

The man I’d enjoyed spending time with was back, but could I trust him to stay?

“Thank you, Heath.” My words came out breathy, and his eyes brightened.

His inner wolf probably felt proud to elicit such a response in me. My own wolf felt immense satisfaction at the offerings her potential mate had provided.

No way, I chided her.

I might crave Heath’s body, and I might hope he would see me through the heat along with his packmates. But a potential mate? Not likely. Not after he’d warned me off already, claiming he and Gage were ‘too dangerous’ for me, and definitely not after the impersonal fuck-and-flee session he’d

treated me to. I didn't want to feel like that ever again if I could help it.

“Good, now someone go take a shower while I show Freya how to protect herself while we're gone,” Gage made a shooing motion.

“Dibs,” Flint grinned, leaning forward to give me a peck on the lips.

He winked at the double meaning when he pulled back, then sauntered toward the shower, stopping to undress along the way.

I couldn't tear my eyes off of him. First, he ripped his shirt up over his head, making his back and rib muscles flex and ripple under his tight, smooth skin. His straight black hair cascaded around his upper body. Then he toed off his moccasins outside the bathroom. As he went through the door, he turned, unzipping his jeans, his eyes on me as though he knew what he was doing to me all along.

His eyes were heavily lidded, and as he pulled off his pants, his cock sprang out at half-mast. Then he grinned and closed the bathroom door. Only then did I inhale, realizing I'd been holding my breath the whole time.

“Definitely soon,” Heath muttered.

When I glanced at the other two, their pupils were blown wide as they stared at me.

“What?” I crossed my arms. “I can't admire my sexy mate?”

Ignoring my question, Gage put a box on the table, opening it to reveal a small handgun.

“This should feel lightweight and easier to wield for you than the type of weapons we usually carry.”

He pulled it from the box, checked the chamber, then handed it to me. Crowding into my personal space, he showed me the trigger safety, the sight, and how best to grip it.

Heath was grinning when I returned the gun to its case.

“Aww, you bought her presents, too,” he cooed in a sugary sweet voice.

“Called in another favor?” I guessed, looking at Gage.

“Oooh, I love calling in a good *favor*.” Heath raised an eyebrow on the last word, making me wonder just what favors he was referencing.

Gage glared, and if he’d been in wolf form, I knew I would’ve seen his hackles rise. “Trina wants to see all three of us to talk over a potential job. I don’t want Freya anywhere near them.”

Heath’s voice and demeanor instantly changed.

“Is that why you got us a place way out here?”

He gestured to the front door. The nearest building was at least twenty car-lengths away.

“The less anyone smells, the better,” Gage answered. “And no wolves live on this side of town.”

The bathroom door opened to reveal Flint towel-drying his long, dark hair, which meant the rest of him stood proud and naked. Somehow, his hard-on hadn’t gone down at all.

“There’s probably enough hot water left for one more quick shower,” Flint glanced between the three of us.

“Freya, do you want a quickie?” Even the cocky innuendo in Heath’s voice couldn’t get me to tear my eyes off Flint’s amazing body.

If the other two weren’t here, I’d—

“Go ahead,” Gage told me. “We need a game plan going into this.”

I knew a dismissal when I heard one. Not bringing me with them into the middle of town, where I might draw unwanted attention, made sense. But I couldn’t help but feel the sting of rejection when I closed the bathroom door and heard the three of them start talking. The message was clear: I wasn’t part of the pack and they didn’t need — or want — my help. Until my heat ended, the only thing I contributed was more trouble and

the only part they wanted me to play was staying out of their way.

But with Flint as my mate, I would become part of the pack. How could I ever prove my worth as a packmate if I was always sidelined? I had to be able to serve some use, even without my wolf or my magic. My mind circled that problem as I quickly showered, not yet arriving on a solution.

When I got out of the shower, I suddenly realized I had brought none of the new clothing Heath had bought into the bathroom with me. I toweled off, listening to the rumble of their deep voices. It sounded like they'd moved over to the living room, which meant I could sneak out and snag some clothes.

But when I opened the bathroom door, I froze when Flint's words hit me. "If her heat really is that close, maybe we shouldn't take the job after all."

"We need it if we're going to stay one step ahead of Ironwood," Gage pointed out.

Flint was the only one in my line of sight from the living room, and he poked his head up when he noticed me. "You okay, moonbeam?"

Even though I stood in nothing but a towel, his expression held nothing but concern for me. I must've looked upset.

"Just — ah, need some clothes."

Heath's massive frame filled the doorway, and his eyes swept over my damp hair to the towel clinging to my body. "Allow me."

Then he tore his gaze away to grab the bag he'd plopped on the kitchen table. My face heated when I realized he'd yet again gone underwear shopping for me. He held up a pair of lacy ones that left little to the imagination.

"Heath," I grumbled, grabbing it and sneaking it on underneath my towel. "Don't you know we women prefer cotton?"

He grinned and offered me the dress next, but I held up a hand to stop him and shook my head.

“What’s the matter?”

“I’m destined to live in hermitage here for the foreseeable future. I’ll save that for when I can go out again.”

“Fine,” he grumbled, digging through the bags until he found me some jeans and a long-sleeve shirt.

Before he could get any ideas, I retreated to the bathroom, even though my wolf pushed me to parade around in front of them all, strutting my stuff. My heat really must be getting closer.

When I came back out, I joined the three of them in the living room. Flint pulled me down onto his lap, and Gage frowned over at us.

“Perhaps we should try the mating bite after all,” Gage mused. “Bring on the heat and get it out of the way.”

I slumped in Flint’s arms, feeling judged as an inconvenience and unwanted because of something that wasn’t even my choice.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered. “I hate that my impending heat is still causing trouble. Part of me thinks it’s right around the corner. Another part of me worries it won’t arrive until I can shift.”

If I can shift, I thought, but didn’t say.

“It’s not your fault, moonbeam,” Flint replied.

Lending support for the idea my heat was looming, the feeling of his breath caressing my neck had me wishing, even in the middle of this not sexy conversation, that Gage and Heath would go away... and leave Flint with me.

He brushed my hair away from my face, studying my expression. Though he looked at me, he answered Gage. “I promised Freya an equal mating.”

And my human teeth weren’t enough to bite him back to share the mate bond.

I sighed. “I asked Brielle if I could suppress my heat, but she said no, that it might not be good since my magic is already bottled up, too. Well, and my wolf.”

“Suppressing a heat or a rut is never healthy, under any circumstance,” Heath sounded serious again, his eyes glittering with something fierce — anger? Protectiveness? I couldn’t tell. “I’m glad she didn’t do that to you.”

“It was the right call,” Gage agreed.

“Do I have time for a shower?” Heath asked. “Cold or not, I don’t care at this point.”

The pack alpha rose to his full height, staring down at the rest of us. “No. It’s time to go.”

“Ah yes, good first impressions get the job. I’m sure our stench will convince them we mean business.” Heath smirked before heading into the kitchen and out the front door.

Flint got to his feet, forcing me up with him. Gage stalked over, trapping me between the two large wolves. Gage’s nostrils flared, and he nodded in satisfaction.

“Good, you’ve masked your scent well.” Gage stepped even closer, leaving me nowhere to go, with Flint’s hard body behind me. “I want that gun close at hand the whole time we’re gone.”

“Should I be worried?” I asked.

“No.” Gage reached up and pushed my hair behind my ear, his thumb stroking my cheek. “Because no matter what happens, we’ll come back for what’s ours.”

Then he shocked me by stooping down and lowering his mouth to mine. Gage had kissed me only once before — to get me to shut up. His beard brushed along my chin as our lips met.

Flint’s hands came around my hips, and my body lit up with desire for them both. Their scents mingled around me — Flint’s crisp and clean from his shower, Gage’s masculine and musky after days in the wildlands as a wolf, yet equally attractive.

I parted my lips, and Gage instantly took control of the kiss. His hand came around the back of my neck, tilting my head just the way he wanted it as his tongue swirled against mine. With Flint's hard chest at my back and his thumbs caressing my hipbones, my hunger for more ratcheted up.

By the time Gage pulled back, we were both panting.

Gage's voice was rough with desire. "Never forget that you belong to the Howling Echo."

His pupils nearly eclipsed his piercing, sky-blue irises as he drew in a deep breath, filling out his thick chest.

"I expect you to live up to your side of the bargain, and we'll uphold ours," he warned.

My breath stuttered across my lips, which still tingled from the aftereffects of that kiss. My body knew exactly what it wanted, even though my mind churned with confusion over my desires.

Gage turned and stalked out of the room. I heard his boots on the front steps, and I turned in a daze to Flint.

He chuckled at my expression. "I see why Gage and Heath pleased you together in the woods. It turns me on to see you this aroused, moonbeam."

Then he crushed me to him, and I could feel just what he meant. I'd felt his hardness digging into me earlier, but all the other sensations had distracted me.

Flint's kiss was gentle, his smooth chin soothing against my face. "Be safe. Only shoot if you have to, but if you have to..."

I nodded. "I won't aim for their kneecaps."

"Good. We'll be back before you know it."

Then Flint followed his packmates outside, and I trailed into the kitchen, looking out the small window in the front door as I watched them leave.

My wolf scratched and scrambled around inside of me, urging me not to let the pack leave me behind. The human side

of me also felt worthless staying cooped up here.

The shower had masked my scent well, according to Gage. They'd said there weren't any wolves on this side of town, and since they were meeting nearby, it didn't sound like they expected to meet up with wolf shifters.

If I ever wanted to prove myself as more than just a burden to them, I needed to know more. I grabbed the gun Gage had given me and tucked it into the back of my jeans.

It was time to find out what other types of jobs the Howling Echo took when they weren't working with a well-established pack like Moonblessed. With my wolf's pack instincts riding me hard, I carefully turned the doorknob and tiptoed outside. My wolf instantly settled down.

If the guys turned back now, I would just wave at them like I was seeing them off. No need for them to know I planned to follow them and find out how I could play a part.

But they didn't look back, so I stalked down the steps, hoping I could contribute my fair share to the cause for once.

Chapter 9

Freya

Lucky for me, the Howling Echo stayed on this side of town and didn't go far. They met at a warehouse on the outskirts of the town. I ducked behind a shop selling hardware and supplies, staying well clear of any windows while I waited to see if anyone else showed up.

After dawdling for ten minutes and fearing someone coming outside to catch me, I decided the Howling Echo must have arrived *after* whoever they were meeting. I darted around two big hauling trucks and made my way to the warehouse's loading platform from one side. I crept up the platform steps, then slowly inched forward past one closed loading door after another. Outside of one, the scent of freshly cut wood met my nose.

Soon, I stood just outside the open loading bay, not daring to look in for fear of being seen. Fortunately, the guys' voices echoed around the empty space and easily reached my ears. My wolf perked up as though pleased I'd followed the pack.

"Right, Tony?" I overheard a woman's ethereal, musical voice and wondered if this was the Trina that Gage had mentioned. My wolf growled internally at the thought of him meeting another woman.

"That's right!" Tony answered in an unfamiliar, gravelly sounding voice.

My wolf's hackles rose. I wondered if it was something about him in particular or if she didn't trust strangers after everything we'd been through.

“And remember that time you made that big score against Denraider?” Trina went on, her musical voice irritating me the more she spoke to my men.

“How could we forget?” Heath chuckled. “That was one of our biggest scores early on. Still is one of the biggest.”

“I’d love to see you pull off something like that again,” she sighed wistfully. “They deserve it.”

“What’d you even do with all that stuff, anyway?” Tony asked in his gravelly voice.

“They gave it to the Dawn Chaser refugees so they could settle somewhere away from Denraider’s conquests,” Trina answered as though he should’ve known already.

My chest expanded with pride for the Howling Echo pack. Hugo and Idori clearly trusted them, and now I had more proof they were the good guys.

The memory of humans fleeing the gas station in the valley far below me came to mind. Gage had warned them to leave before the bandits showed up — more than most wolf shifters would do for humans, from my limited knowledge outside of the Ironwood pack.

“I guess that makes sense,” Tony said. “You wouldn’t be hard up for more jobs if you were still sitting fat and pretty from that one.”

Even my wolf was feeling proud of the Howling Echo pack, but his words brought me back to reality.

“We can’t afford anything nearly that risky right now, if that’s why you brought it up,” Gage cautioned.

I deflated, realizing they were about to lose their shot at another job because of me. They’d protected me in spite of all the problems I’d caused them. Gage probably cursed himself for ever taking me up on our deal.

“Well...” Tony said just as I heard a boot scuff concrete behind me.

I whirled, my hand going for the gun in the back of my pants.

“Stop right there,” a rough voice warned, and I froze, my fingers around the grip of the gun. “Hands up.”

I turned to see a burly man with his hand on the holstered gun at his hip. A bulge where his pants met his boot indicated another weapon. I slowly brought my hands out where he could see them, cursing myself for letting him get the drop on me.

“Whoa, there,” Mr. Guns stepped closer to me. “Hear anything interesting?”

“Maybe.” I cocked my head, meeting the burly man’s eyes, refusing to back down. Inside, my wolf snarled, ready for anything.

From what I could see, he looked human, but that meant he could be a shifter or a witch for all I knew.

He nodded toward the open loading door. “Maybe you’d hear better inside.”

I sighed, realizing Mr. Guns was probably friends with the other two voices I’d overheard. I’d been found out, so there was no point trying to hide anymore. I backed up in front of the open loading bay door.

Chairs scrapped against the concrete floor as five figures rose to their feet at the sight of me and my new friend. Flint, Heath, and Gage were all there, but I scoped out the other two.

Tony turned out to be a wiry looking fellow with curly dirty blond hair and a scar just under his eye like someone had tried to blind him and missed their mark. And Trina, the woman with the musical voice, stood taller and more willowy than anyone else, her pointed ears and cyan blue hair giving her away as one of the fae.

“Well, why don’t you join us, darlin’?” Mr. Guns took a step closer to me, and his nostrils flared. “The name’s Cody, and I happen to think you smell positively divine.”

“She’s ours,” Heath growled.

Gage stalked over to me with a blank expression on his face. Somehow that was scarier than seeing him glare at me.

“That’s funny.” Cody grabbed my wrist and raised it. “I don’t see a pack mark on her wrists, nor a bite mark on her neck. Looks like she’s up for the taking.”

I twisted my wrist free, then grabbed my handy knife, putting it between me and him. Not daring to say anything in case I made this situation worse and guaranteed they didn’t get the job, I glared at him.

Cody chuckled as Gage grabbed my other wrist, pulling me behind him.

“What Heath meant was that she’s our property,” he growled as I bristled. “So keep your paws off her.”

Gage and Cody stood still for a moment, tension radiating from their bodies. Cody’s lips curled back in a snarl as he dropped his eyes.

“Calm down,” Cody growled. “You’re the more dominant wolf here, I get it, I get it. I won’t touch your... property.”

He leaned around Gage as if to catch another look at me.

“But it is curious how close she is to her heat without a mate mark...”

This time, growls tore from three throats as Heath and Flint also stalked toward me.

“Ah, so that’s why you’re not up for your normal jobs,” Tony said. “That’s too bad.”

“Tony’s right,” the tall Fae woman agreed. “You’re no good to us with her in tow. Not for the job we had in mind.”

My shoulders slumped, and Flint wrapped an arm around me, pulling me against him.

“I guess we’ll catch up with you another time,” Tony passed us and walked with Cody outside.

The fae woman gave me a curious look as she passed. But she said nothing, trailing the other two. They went down the stairs off to one side, then I caught sight of the three of them walking back toward the center of town.

The tension in the warehouse was so thick I could've cut it with my knife, which I resheathed now that they were gone.

"I'm sorry," I said, tucking my chin. "I feel like such an asshole, ruining things for you again."

Seeking an ally, I turned to Flint, who assured me, "You didn't ruin anything, moonbeam. But we want to keep you safe. You shouldn't have come."

My spirits fell, but I dared a glance up at Gage. It was almost reassuring to see the stormy expression had replaced his neutral mask.

"Where's the handgun I gave you?"

I turned and pointed to it in the back of my pants. "Cody got the drop on me outside. I was too slow to aim at him in time."

"You shouldn't have followed us," Gage growled. "Now, more people know about you. And Cody has your scent."

"They won't do anything stupid to risk future jobs." Heath's eyes darted outside like he wanted to make sure they didn't come back. "Cody knows better than to mess with what's ours."

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I... wanted to know more about the types of jobs you take. So that maybe I can help somehow."

"That's not how this works," Gage snapped.

"Gage," Heath reached out a hand toward his pack alpha. "We really couldn't have taken that job right now, if it's what I think it was."

Even though he was defending me, my shoulders slumped. "Because of me."

Gage paced back and forth. "Because we left behind all our vehicles and weapons and supplies."

"Because of me. Because I had to lead Ironwood away from the Moonblessed packlands, and you followed me."

Gage stalked over to me, and I backed up until my shoulder met a shelving unit. His hands came up on either side of my head, pinning me in without touching me. A growl tore from his throat as his eyes burned into mine.

“Because you’re ours and we won’t let you walk into danger alone.”

This version of Gage confused me. His reaction made me feel like I was following an unmarked path, with twists and turns I hadn’t anticipated when I started this way.

So I raised my chin and met Gage’s intense sky-blue gaze. “Did you guys really help out those refugees?”

He blinked. “What?”

“Dawn Chaser?”

Gage exhaled and let his arms drop. “We did, for all the good it did.”

“What do you mean?”

“Denraider conquered their packlands,” Flint explained. “We helped the refugees, but even still, they didn’t have the resources to go far. The pack they agreed to join... said they would take them all in.” His mouth twisted. “But made them little better than slaves, naming them all omegas and killing the few alphas left among them.”

“Because no alpha can pretend to be that low on the hierarchy,” Heath growled.

Flint brushed my hair behind my ear. “As far as refugees go, you and I were some of the luckiest after losing our packlands. The spirits guided our paths.”

I smiled at the thought. “They brought us together.”

He nodded, but behind him, Heath growled.

“Why did you really follow us, little wolf?”

“My wolf didn’t like watching you go, and I wanted to feel useful,” I admitted. “And I didn’t want to stay cooped up there without you guys.”

Flint's gentle, understanding smile nearly brought tears to my eyes. "She wants her pack. She knows we're meant to be."

"Still, it wasn't safe," Gage growled.

Heath crowded in, glaring at Flint before staring down at me.

"I—"

Heath cut me off. "If you hate being cooped up so much, maybe it's time we took you out somewhere. I know just the place. There's a restaurant owner who owes us for saving his ass after a stupid mistake. And it's worthy of that sexy dress I got you."

The hunger in his golden-rimmed eyes was unmistakable. My wolf pushed me to flirt back, eager to entice her mate. She and I were definitely not on the same page when it came to Heath.

I stepped away from him, and Gage waved us all outside. "Let's go back to the house and discuss how things are going to be."

Chapter 10

Heath

Flint's suggestion that maybe Freya's wolf would choose all of us had been playing havoc with me for the past few days. My wolf had already been certain she would make a good mate, but now Flint had gone and gotten my human side curious, as well.

What would it be like to share one mate among us? Was it actually possible? How would all the claiming bites work? Did I dare dream of such a thing?

I had more important things to worry about. Like what we were going to do to replenish our coffers now that Trina and the rest had decided not to give us the job.

And yet, Freya's tempting apple pie scent tantalized me every moment of every day, making it hard to think of anything but her. She and Flint were disgustingly sweet to each other, giving each other long, lingering glances and sharing secret smiles. But what irked me more was what happened when her eyes landed on Gage. His gaze smoldered every time he caught her staring.

Meanwhile, she barely tolerated my presence. Half the time when I walked into a room, she walked out of it.

I knew how stupid I was being. I'd intentionally put space between us so that she would see Flint as her best choice of mate, not me. I'd warned her that Gage and I were more dangerous to get involved with, and that was true... We both had a lot more baggage that could come and bite our tails someday, while Flint was a less complicated option. But if

Flint was right... if her wolf might choose all of us... had my human side completely ruined our chances?

My wolf refused to accept that, hence why I'd been driven to buy her some nice clothes. Even though my wolf didn't understand many human customs, he knew that bringing our mate gifts might help win her over. He knew that providing for her might show her we were worthy. And he knew that protecting her would keep our bond secure.

Maybe my wolf would be a fine mate for Freya's wolf, whenever she finally decided to make her grand entrance. But my human side... not so much.

I'd never been one for long-term relationships. The fact that the Howling Echo never stayed in one place long enough for my fuck buddies to evolve into real relationships was my typical excuse.

I'd always been the type to fuck and forget. Sure, my fuck buddies looked forward to when I came back into town after a successful job, but that's all we ever were to each other... fuck buddies. I'd never tried to form a true, long-term relationship with someone. I'd never wanted to, because I'd known what would happen if I did.

My father had raised us in an environment of constant hostility, shaping each of his children into political instruments. He'd already arranged high-profile marriages for my siblings to bolster his own political career, which meant he was running out of willing offspring to marry off. If he had his way, he would've matched me with some influential scion in a different magical species to solidify alliances, just like he had with my siblings. He'd never wanted any of us getting involved with other wolves.

It was part of what had driven me to seek my own path, but nothing could change how my upbringing shaped me into the alphahole I was today. And that guy? He wasn't any good for Freya. She had every right to reject that asshole.

Which had been my goal up until about three days ago.

If I wanted any chance of being with her, something had to change. At this point, it seemed impossible, but... What a life that would be, taking Freya as my mate and escaping my father's plans for me once and for all. I had to at least try to make that future a possibility.

“And he said, ‘Exactly’!” Flint finished the story he'd been telling.

Freya laughed, smiling as she looked between him and Gage. Seeing her snow-blue eyes light up with joy like that? It killed me. I wanted to be the one making her smile.

I'd tried to convince myself to let her go, and the struggle to maintain my distance had made me say and do stupid things. But Flint's madness had seduced me right back into pursuing her again, wanting her again — not that I'd ever stopped. Now, every fiber of my being wanted to steal the spotlight, to bask in her full attention.

But I shouldn't. I would only hurt her again.

We seemed to have convinced her the deal was still on, but that didn't matter to me now. I would keep my dick to myself until her heat hit. Then I would patrol outside the house until I couldn't stand it anymore. If she'd moaned my name in her sleep the way she had for Gage... I already knew I wouldn't be able to resist her heat.

No matter what Flint said about multiple mates, getting too attached now might end in heartbreak. All bets were off until her wolf appeared.

So, the most important thing was to keep her safe during the heat. The scent of three strong alphas around her should warn off any wolf who got too close.

Most other species wouldn't react to the pheromones at all. Humans probably wouldn't even smell them. So a mixed-species town like this might be our best bet for riding out her heat.

If it would ever arrive. The longer it took, the more I felt my resolve slipping.

“I thought you had some kind of punishment in mind for Freya,” I growled at Gage, sick of seeing the three of them looking so cute together.

A sudden increase in Freya’s heady scent made me smirk. The thought of being punished clearly aroused her... and gave me naughty ideas. I wondered if, subconsciously, she’d decided to follow us to earn herself another punishment. She was perfectly naughty for us.

And she was the first woman Gage had ever shared with me, despite all my previous attempts. The day he and I ‘punished’ Freya together in the forest was the hottest thing I’d experienced in my long history of sexual indulgence. Watching him bend her over and fill her up while she sucked me off? For just a moment, I’d felt connected to him the way I’d always craved. All thanks to her.

I moved slightly to adjust myself in my pants.

“We couldn’t have taken that job anyway,” Gage shrugged.

My eyes practically bugged out of my head. He’d once complained that she had me and Flint all twisted up. Now it seemed like she had the two of them caught in her spell.

“If we’re waiting for her heat before we take a job, then maybe one of you should bite her already,” I grumbled.

Flint shook his head. “Not until she can shift enough to bite me back.” He swept her hair behind her shoulder, revealing the juncture between her neck and shoulder — the traditional spot for the mating bite. “Freya deserves an equal mating.”

I let out a snort of exasperation. The closer we got to her heat, the more her scent increased, and the more it affected all of us. Especially when she was aroused. The glint of gold in our pack alpha’s eyes proved that even he wasn’t immune.

Nor was I. That’s why I’d bought her that dress and those sexy panties. I longed to see her wearing them, proof that she accepted my gifts. But she refused to wear them until she could go out again.

Maybe taking her out would help me get back into Freya's good graces. Like Flint, and possibly even Gage, I wanted to help her feel wanted and special instead of feeling like a burden to us all the time.

Oliver still owed us a favor for saving his bacon, quite literally. He wouldn't still own that restaurant if not for us. Had she ever been to a nice restaurant like Dark Potion?

I doubted it, not with the way the Ironwood pack had treated her. And thanks to my father's tutelage, I would have the advantage over my packmates at a place like that. They might feel just as out of sorts as Freya, so it could even the playing field among the three of us.

I doubted it, not with the way the Ironwood pack had treated her. And thanks to my father's tutelage, I would have the advantage over my packmates at a place like that. They might feel just as out of sorts as Freya, so it could even the playing field among the three of us for her affections.

And maybe, while we were there, we could broker a different job with a higher-class clientèle.

"If we're looking for leads..." I said, catching Gage's attention. "Oliver could let us know if he's heard anything. And it would be a good chance to get Freya out of the house."

Flint let out a low rumble, the start to a growl. "If there's other wolf shifters..."

"We're not really the type to end up on Oliver's usual guest list," I pointed out. "I doubt many of our kind will be there. But I could reach out, make sure he understands the situation."

Gage glanced over to assess Freya's curious expression. "Fine. Explain our... situation. And swear him to secrecy. If his staff or other patrons get word back to Ironwood..."

Flint and I both straightened as our pack alpha's protective fury washed over us through the pack bond. He wasn't trying to hide how he felt about Freya from us anymore.

"Ironwood will never hear of us through him," I swore. "He knows how much he owes us."

“Make sure of it,” Gage growled.

With my pack alpha’s order, I left Freya alone with those two moon-eyed fools as I stepped outside to make the call. A light, dangerous feeling expanded in my stomach, making me feel... giddy? Like a child opening new gifts.

When it came to Freya, we were all done for. This was the perfect chance to find my own way of bringing joy to her. And maybe, if we were all lucky, we could end the night with the kind of sexy punishment she enjoyed so much...

Chapter 11

Freya

I spent the night curled up with Flint, but of course, the three of them rotated who stood watch. So in the middle of the night, I woke up cold and alone in bed after Flint left. When I rolled over, I was surprised to find a massive alpha wolf asleep on the floor of my room. His eyes cracked open, glinting gold in the moonlight streaming in from the window.

From the color of his fur — white on his legs and muzzle fading into gray along his head and upper back — I knew the wolf must be Gage. It occurred to me that Heath must be asleep in the other bed, and Gage had come in here rather than bed down with his packmate. My lips fell open, and I almost told Gage he didn't have to sleep on the floor, that surely we could share the bed.

The wolf and I stared at one another, neither making a sound. Even though Flint had essentially given me permission to be with Gage and Heath, too, inviting Gage into my bed still felt... off. I couldn't imagine the powerfully built man peacefully curled up in sleep beside me at all. If I invited him to bed, I knew exactly what would happen — neither one of us would get any sleep.

And I wasn't sure I was ready to admit how much I wanted anyone aside from my mate. At some point, I must have dozed off. By the time I woke up, Flint was back in bed beside me like he'd never left, letting someone else stand watch.

Later that day, Gage found me sitting bored out of my mind in front of the TV, mindlessly clicking through channels.

“We’re taking you with us to Dark Potion. We have a contact we’re meeting there.”

He said that last bit defensively, as though that explained why they would bring me. I raised my eyebrow just as Heath came in the room.

“And it’s the perfect chance to wear this.”

He held the dress he’d bought me, and his playful expression almost had me fooled into thinking this was the Heath I’d started to fall for. Until his next words.

“It’ll show everyone you belong to us.”

Not with us. *To* us.

Gage motioned me to go ahead. “We’re leaving soon.”

I sighed and got up, taking the dress from Heath. Trying to brush past him to the bathroom, I instead ran straight into his muscular body when he refused to move.

“What’s your problem?” I glared up at him, refusing to avert my eyes.

He shrugged. “You can get dressed here.”

I glanced over my shoulder at Gage, but his impassive expression told me I’d get no help from him. Suddenly feeling caught between two predators, I glanced over Heath’s shoulder, wondering if Flint was around.

“Go on, princess, we haven’t got all night,” Gage said from behind me.

I grumbled but pulled off my shirt, watching Heath’s eyes light up.

“No bra for this dress, hottie,” Heath reminded me.

“Obviously,” I said, considering how far down the back dipped.

“You can lose the panties too,” he added, holding out the lacy pair.

I snarled at him, refusing to relinquish the panties. Then I pulled the dress on, not doing anything to make it look sexy as

I did so. But Heath's eyes devoured me anyway, and I could feel the weight of Gage's stare as well. I half expected them to tear the dress right back off of me, but Heath grabbed my wrist and deposited the lacy panties into my hand.

I rolled my eyes when he refused to move. Without lifting the hem of the dress, I tugged down the panties I was wearing, letting them fall to the floor, then pulled the lacy ones on, letting the dress keep me covered. Still, when I straightened back up, I could feel both men's eyes ravenously raking over my body.

And those barely there lace panties? Yeah, they'd only stayed dry for a split second. All the air seemed to disappear from the room, and I found myself holding my breath, waiting to see what they would do.

Heath's expression softened, and his lips parted. His big hands came down gently on my shoulders, and he stepped in until his lips ghosted across the outer shell of my ear.

"Tonight is all about you, little wolf. We hope to snag a job, but never doubt that we're doing this all for you."

Heath's words woke something primal in me, and my wolf preened at the idea of three alpha males bending over backward for her. Then I felt Gage's powerful presence at my side. He guided me past Heath, who moved aside for his pack alpha.

At the front door, Gage's fingertips slid down to my lower back, caressing my naked skin. Goosebumps flared to life across my body, and I shivered with his touch.

Flint waited at the bottom of the stairs and opened a car door for me. "You're beautiful."

I beamed from the praise, a little annoyed that Gage and Heath hadn't complimented me, and then instantly got annoyed at myself for thinking they ever would. They were both muscle-headed brutes. Not sweet gentlemen like my mate, who deserved all of my attention.

So why did I crave them as much as I did Flint?

I sighed as I got into the car, wondering when my heat might hit so I could just get all of this awkward pining over with. That had to be the explanation, no matter what Flint thought. After my heat, I would convince Flint to claim me, even though I wouldn't be able to bite him back until I could shift... if I ever could.

Surely my attraction to anyone but my mate would fade after I'd been claimed, right?

Dark Potion stood alone and imposing on its street, with dark shutters and a deep purple door that seemed to open magically as we approached. Men in what looked like tuxedos stood to either side of the door to welcome us in. I felt like a celebrity as we passed by them both and headed through the restaurant to a darkened corner booth in the back.

It curved around the half-moon shaped table, open on one side so the server could reach us. Flint slid in first, then tugged me along behind him until we sat in the center of the curved bench seat. Heath piled in behind me, leaving Gage to sit beside Flint on the front edge.

The booth was designed to sit six or eight people, so there was plenty of space, but no, Heath crowded in right beside me. I glared at him, but he just grinned right back. So, I decided to treat him like I'd always done with any bully — not give him the satisfaction of getting to me.

Instead, I scanned our surroundings, noticing all the tables with their pristine tablecloths, place settings, and flowery centerpieces. From my vantage in the corner, I felt like I could see the entire restaurant. We occupied one of the only booths in the place. Most of the other tables were round, but smaller, with two to four chairs.

The dim lighting gave the place an air of secrecy, as did the quiet music and the volume at which the customers spoke. All of them were dressed in upscale attire, and I suddenly felt thankful Heath had insisted I wear the dress tonight. Still, I felt completely out of place among the finery and understated elegance. And judging from the sour expression on Gage's face, I wasn't the only one.

Heath leaned over to me and murmured, “Someday, we’ll take a job big enough to put us out of work for a while. As soon as that happens, I’ll take you to dinner at fancy places like this as often as you want.”

I glanced at Heath out of the corner of my eye, surprised by his words. It was the first time I’d heard him really talk about a future with me, and... it sent shivers down my spine. Inside, my wolf felt pleased by his promise and determined to see it come to pass.

When at last our waiter appeared, he looked completely unlike every other server in the place. He wore an all-white chef’s outfit, and from the splotches on it, he seemed to have been hard at work already.

“Oliver, how good to see you again,” Heath grinned at him.

The man nervously looked between the three of them, and his eyes barely danced over me. To my surprise, he averted his gaze, even though my weak nose sensed he wasn’t a wolf shifter at all.

“Welcome to Dark Potion, my friends. I owe its success to you, and I’m glad you saw fit to grace my humble franchise with your presence.”

“Right,” Gage said in his gravelly voice. “You know why we’re here.”

“Indeed, your contact is already here.” He gestured toward the front of the restaurant, toward another dark corner. “I hope that lady and the gentleman accompanying her have business that will satisfy your needs.”

“Thanks, Oliver, I knew you’d come through for us,” Heath grinned, but his wolfish expression seemed hungry and dangerous. “Hope it’s something good.”

Oliver paled. “If not, I—I can surely, I mean—”

Gage interrupted him. “Take our order so we look less suspicious. Heath will talk to them in a moment.”

“Of course.” Oliver instantly seemed to regain his footing as he whipped out a pad and pen. He rattled off a list of specials full of words I didn’t know the meaning of. I guessed that at least a third of them were in French.

“Is there... a regular menu?” I whispered to Heath, the only one who seemed in his element.

He smiled proudly at me. “It changes every night, but don’t worry, Oliver has assured us anything we order is on the house.”

He glanced meaningfully over at Oliver, who bobbed his head enthusiastically.

Even though he still wouldn’t look directly at me, he added, “Heath is absolutely right, my lady. And I’ll bring you another plate at no cost if anything fails to meet your expectations.” He raised his pen. “Ladies first.”

But it wasn’t the price I was worried about so much as what I was ordering.

“Uhhh...” I glanced over at Flint, who gave me a lopsided smile and a shrug of his shoulder as if to say, ‘I’m as lost as you.’

“Veal, lamb, duck, or bison,” Heath’s hand slid to my thigh, squeezing reassuringly. “Whichever the lady would prefer.”

He smiled over at me, his eyes lit with an expression I couldn’t begin to interpret. It took me a second, but I suddenly realized Heath had just boiled down everything Oliver had rattled off into four things for me to pick from.

I honestly couldn’t remember what veal was, so I said the only one I was actually familiar with eating. “Duck.”

“Bison for me,” Flint said.

“Veal,” Gage said.

“Then I’ll round us out with the lamb,” Heath added. “And I hope these other lugs will let me try theirs. It all sounds delicious, Oliver.”

The man smiled his first genuine smile of the evening, preening under the praise. “I can’t wait to hear what you think! Oh! And... drinks?”

He didn’t rattle off a list this time, so I asked for iced tea. After the guys ordered their drinks, Oliver bustled off. Heath slid out of the booth to go talk to their contact, and I missed the calming weight of his hand almost immediately. Without him here, I felt lost at sea.

I leaned into Flint and whispered, “Are you as intimidated as I am?”

He grinned and kissed me, shocking me for a moment. But as his lips moved against mine, I found myself relaxing into him.

He pulled back and answered, “Yes, but as an alpha, I have to hide it.”

I laughed, and my hand came down on his thigh beneath the table. I thought I felt... as I moved my hand, it came into contact with a very firm bulge.

“Oh my,” I grinned wickedly at him.

That kiss must’ve gotten him going. Unable to resist, I let my hand cover his bulge, and he bucked his hips, making me chuckle.

He whispered against my lips, “Just one kiss has me primed for you.”

“What would two kisses do?” I asked.

A server interrupted us by bringing over our drinks. She stood far too close to Gage for my liking. My inner wolf went wild, growling and scratching at my insides, trying to get out so I could challenge her. She kept her gaze averted, but my animal side wasn’t fooled.

Gage slammed a hand down on the table, making all four glasses slosh over onto the white tablecloth.

“We only want Oliver himself to serve us,” he growled.

With a yelp, the woman scurried away. It was then that I sensed it on the air... she was a wolf shifter.

Flint hooked a finger to tilt my chin up. He smiled, rubbing his nose against mine. "We're yours, Freya. She's no threat."

I squeezed his leg, grounding myself in his presence. Moon Goddess spare me... I was losing my mind.

"Your instincts are going to take over the closer you get to your heat," he reassured me. "It's normal."

"It doesn't feel normal," I grumbled. "I've never... I spent years thinking my wolf would never appear. Now she's constantly in the back of my mind."

"You get used to it," Gage said. "Once she comes out, the two of you will... come to an agreement."

I glanced over at the pack alpha, surprised that even he was trying to reassure me.

"If she comes out," I pointed out.

"Don't give up hope," Flint said. "Hugo said that other wolf didn't shift until the full moon after his twenty-fifth birthday. We won't know for sure until then."

Eager to think about anything besides the upcoming chance for my wolf to disappoint me again, I slid my hand back up Flint's thigh.

"When is your birthday, anyway?" Gage asked.

His words brought me back to territory I didn't want to tread across, so I snapped, "How would I know? I was a refugee, remember? My adoptive mother assigned me a birth date, but her guess was as good as any."

My fake birthday had been just another way I'd felt like an outcast in the Ironwood pack.

I didn't spare Gage a glance to see how my news struck him. Bad enough to see the compassion in Flint's gaze. When I tilted my head up for another kiss, he seemed to understand what I needed. No sooner had his lips met mine than I could feel him lengthening beneath my hand.

We were in full make-out territory by the time Oliver came over with a giant serving tray.

“My apologies, Gage,” he muttered as he began placing our plates in front of us. “It won’t happen again. I didn’t realize she...” His eyes flicked over to me and down again. “...was so close to her heat.”

“Heath informed you of our situation, did he not?” Gage refused to back down.

Oliver’s shoulders slumped. “I—well, you see—”

“Are there any other wolf shifters here tonight?” Gage growled.

“One other table, but I made sure they were seated in the other dining room,” Oliver assured him. “And they’re a mated pair.”

“Good.”

“If you need anything at all—”

“I’ll wave you down,” Gage answered.

“Very well. I’ll leave you to enjoy your meal in peace.”

“Eat,” Gage told me as soon as Oliver left. “And let Flint enjoy his bison. It’s rare that he gets any.”

I carefully carved off a chunk of duck, then slid my hand back into Flint’s lap as I tried the first bite. As soon as the flavor hit my tongue, I moaned.

“Freya...” The warning note in Gage’s voice brought me back to the present. His sky-blue eyes narrowed.

“Sorry,” I whispered, knowing that bringing me here was already a risk.

“Try a bite of veal,” Gage said, raising his fork.

If I’d been holding mine, I would’ve dropped it in surprise.

But both Flint and Gage’s hungry gazes made me want to follow his command. I leaned over Flint, and Gage guided his fork into my mouth. When my lips closed around it, I saw the faintest hint of gold overtake his sky-blue eyes.

Then the flavor exploded on my tongue, and I moaned again, settling back in my seat to savor it. By the time I opened my eyes again, Gage had one hand under the table. I grinned, feeling powerful — I'd gotten the pack alpha hard with just one little sound.

Heath's return interrupted my victorious moment. He slid into the curved booth beside me, caging me in beside Flint. Then he set about instantly devouring his lamb.

"Well?" Gage asked before spearing another bite and chewing slowly, his attention on Heath.

"The job's ours if we want it," Heath assured him before taking another bite.

His intense caramel gaze rested on me as he spoke, and his eyes lit with interest when he noticed where my hand rested beneath the table.

"But I'm more interested in what happened while I was gone." Heath's hand slid to my thigh beneath the table, and I twisted in my seat to glance over at him.

"What? Can't I touch my mate in public?"

"Of course you can. But the deal says we also get to touch you. Whenever we want. However we want."

His hand slid up my thigh and under the hem of the dress he'd bought me. My breath stuttered. I'd been teasing Flint, getting him worked up for later. Something told me that wasn't what Heath had in mind for me.

"Gage never did punish you for ruining our last job, little wolf," Heath whispered into my ear. "I say your punishment is overdue."

Chapter 12

Freya

The moment I heard the word ‘punishment’ fall from Heath’s sinful lips, my arousal instantly soaked my panties. Heath’s arm snaked around behind me, and he guided my chin until I looked over at the pack alpha. Gage’s sky-blue eyes locked onto us, but he continued eating, as though this was a normal part of the outing.

“So what?” I murmured. “You think you get to punish me for having fun with Flint?”

“No. You know what you did to deserve punishment,” Heath murmured.

That word again lit my body up with desire. Honestly, I had enjoyed every punishment they’d concocted for me in the past, even that time that Heath made me come without a sound for daring to touch myself without them. Well, I’d loved the physical parts at least. I was still angry with him for how he’d made me feel. Regardless of the deal, I wasn’t going to let him make me feel that way again if I could help it.

“Of course. I can do...” Heath’s arm remained draped around me, while his other hand slid up my leg again, then pulled my thigh across his lap beneath the table. “Whatever I want to you. For any reason. Or no reason. Because you’re ours.”

Maybe it was thanks to my oncoming heat, but I really, really wanted to see where this was going. Still, I glanced over at Flint to see what he thought of it all.

His look of outright lust made heat flood my body. His eyes scanned my face, watching me closely, as though waiting

for something. Flint had once watched Gage take me... It seemed he was ready to watch again. As long as he knew I wanted it.

Heath's calloused fingertips slid up the inside of my other thigh, teasing me beneath the dress he'd bought for me.

"I know you feel guilty that we lost that other job," Heath whispered in my ear. "But you can make it up to us. Then we'll be even."

Then his fingers slid without hesitation straight into my panties. His fingertips delved beneath the edge, and I turned back to face him just in time to see his eyes go completely golden. For a moment, I stared into the eyes of a predator as his wolf took over.

A sudden draft caressed between my thighs as Heath tore my panties completely off, making me gasp. My wetness made the air feel colder than it really was.

Heath fought for control of his wolf, but gold still ringed his caramel irises. I shuddered when his fingertips met my body, thankfully without claws.

"No pain, remember?" he growled. "That was part of our deal."

He grinned, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. His fingers circled my clit, and my mouth gaped open in shock. He was really about to do this to me in public. We might be in the corner of the restaurant, but there were plenty of other tables full of people nearby. They ignored us as the well-dressed waitstaff bustled among them.

"Freya?" Flint questioned, drawing my attention back to him.

He scanned my face again, his intense gaze sharpening. My lips parted on a gasp as Heath's fingers grazed my most sensitive areas. I nodded to Flint, letting him know I was okay.

Heath's arm tightened around my shoulders. "I remember watching you come without a sound. Good practice for today, little wolf. Because Flint and I are going to drive you wild..."

and we wouldn't want to ruin business for our friend Oliver. Not after he worked so *hard* for this place."

Heath ground the heel of his hand into my clit, making me gasp.

Flint's big palm lifted my other thigh and brought it over to his lap just as Heath's fingertips pierced me. My head fell back in ecstasy at the way these men were ruining me... in public. I struggled not to make a sound, and my hand fell to Heath's forearm, begging him to slow down, to let me get my bearings.

But his fingers plunged in and out of me, my juices flowing over the seat beneath me. I gasped and nearly moaned, but just then, Flint grabbed my chin and pulled me into a kiss, stealing my sounds.

"That's cheating, Flint," Heath laughed.

"She's not the only one you're driving wild," Flint growled when he pulled back.

I reached over to feel Flint, rock solid in his pants. But he grabbed my hand, refusing to let me play. Then he tilted his head toward Gage.

When I looked at the pack alpha, my wetness gushed over Heath's fingers. Gage had given up eating to drape both arms over the back of the booth behind him as he watched the show.

Heath withdrew his fingers, and my chest heaved as I tried to catch my breath. But when he swirled his fingertips over my clit, my hips bucked, and only Flint's firm hand kept me in place.

Gage's intense gaze remained locked on me as I panted and tried not to whimper. Then his lips curled up in a smirk.

"You like it when we punish you, don't you, princess?"

I opened my mouth in a soundless gasp before answering the pack alpha with another silent nod of my head.

"Put her to the test," Gage told the others. "If she makes so much as a sound, she doesn't get to come for the next five days."

I almost whimpered again, but caught myself.

Gage leaned forward. “Personally, I’d love to hear you moan, princess. But if you do, we’ll make you beg to come. And when we decide we’re done? You’ll still be left to beg. For five. Whole. Days.”

Heath punctuated the pack alpha’s words by spearing me with two fingers, and I doubled over with the pleasure of it, my legs still spread wide across their laps. My mouth fell open, and Gage grinned like he’d won.

“Unless her heat hits before then,” Flint pointed out, his voice firm, as if not even a command from his pack alpha could change his mind. As always, my protective mate was prepared to fight on my behalf.

“Show him, little wolf,” Heath whispered in my ear, distracting me. “Show Gage how much you want to come. Show him you’ll do whatever it takes to squeeze around my fingers. Maybe then you’ll get to come on our cocks after we get out of here.”

My inner walls clamped down on Heath’s fingers, and I bit my lip so hard I thought it would bleed.

“That’s it,” Flint encouraged from my other side.

Gage grinned. “Flint doesn’t want to go five days without.”

A waiter from another table came over as Heath’s fingers curled inside of me, trying to make me come. Too bad for him, the server distracted me too much.

“Can I get you anything...” The server trailed off as he noticed how everyone at the table tensed up.

I sat silently, Heath’s fingers still inside me, making me feel so naughty. The server seemed oblivious.

Gage growled. “We only deal with Oliver, no one else.”

Flint spoke in a tight voice, “We’re good, man, thanks.”

When the server’s eyes lingered on me, Heath growled, “Go on before we let our wolves out to play.”

My inner walls clenched at the raw threat in his voice, and Heath grinned.

“Oooh, she liked that.”

“Are you okay, miss?” the server tried one last time, causing all three Howling Echo wolves to growl.

I nodded, knowing better than to say a word. But I desperately needed him to leave, because I wouldn't last much longer.

“Go,” Gage growled, and the guy finally took the hint and left.

I watched him walk away, glancing over his shoulder once as he headed for the kitchens, probably to tell Oliver.

Heath glanced past me and said, “Get her clit for me, would you?”

Flint slid one hand to my knee, keeping it pinned against his leg. Then he obliged Heath and let his fingers tease over my clit. My hips bucked, and that only forced Heath's fingers deeper.

It was all I could do not to cry out when he curled his fingers. I wrapped one arm around Flint, my fingers clawing into his shoulder. My pleasure ratcheted up every time he swirled his fingers.

With both of them to either side of me, I stared across the table at Gage, whose sky-blue eyes never once turned gold, not even when that server interrupted us. The pack alpha displayed total control, and I suddenly longed to see it break.

He calmly sat there watching me come unraveled as his two packmates touched me under the table, yet he didn't move a muscle. Except for the intense heat in his gaze, he could've been watching a movie. The only sign the scene before him affected him at all was a slight tick as his jaw clenched, though the rest of him appeared relaxed.

“Let me hear you, princess,” Gage teased. “One little moan. One tiny whimper. And we'll leave you begging for days.”

“Don’t let him win,” Flint whispered, and his fingers flattened, massaging my entire clit all at once.

He had no idea how close he’d brought me to moaning just then.

“Come on my fingers,” Heath growled.

Something powerful built within me, but suddenly, I wanted to deny it. They only cared if I made noise while I came, but there wasn’t anything that said I had to come. I could just... not.

I pulled my legs back, but together, Flint and Heath spread my legs even farther, tilting my hips up and forcing me to lean against the back of the booth.

As far as anyone could see, I appeared completely clothed, but beneath the table, I was wanton and dirty. Two men were about to make me come in front of an entire roomful of people, and none of them would even notice unless I slipped up.

I gave up any pretense that I could avoid coming as Flint and Heath joined forces to drive me wild. With a gasp, I let my head fall back as my legs began trembling.

Flint swirled his fingers even faster, then suddenly pinched my clit just as Heath curled his fingers inside of me just right. The orgasm smashed into me, causing my whole body to convulse. I clawed Flint’s shoulder, and my mouth opened wide in a silent scream of euphoria.

Wave after wave of pleasure hit me as Flint and Heath worked me over the edge, keeping my thighs forced wide open. My abs clenched, and I curled forward. Gage’s lips quirked up in a satisfied smile, his gaze dark with desire. He licked his lips as my orgasm shuddered to an end.

I took in a massive breath, my chest heaving. Flint and Heath let my legs slide closed, and I leaned against Flint, who kissed the top of my head. My heart was racing, and I could’ve sworn I saw stars at one point.

“You loved every second,” he whispered.

Was that why Flint had taken part in it? Because he knew it would be one of the best orgasms of my life? With the weight of all their stares on me, I wanted to hide my face in his chest.

“Good girl.” Heath said from my other side, “I knew you could do it.”

Without lifting my head, I twisted to look at him. His praise warmed my whole body as his worshipful gaze met mine.

Then he raised his hand — the one he’d fucked me with. He showed it to Gage as if asking for his pack alpha’s blessing. Then he brought his fingers to his mouth and began licking them clean, like they were as tasty as an ice cream cone. His gaze bored into me, and suddenly I felt... out of place.

He’d taken my voice again, forcing me to do what he wanted without a sound. Had I really just let them do that to me in public at a fancy place like this? What was the matter with me? If I’d been in heat, that would’ve been one thing. As it was, I had no excuse.

Flint must’ve felt me tense up, because he asked, “Are you okay, moonbeam?”

“Let me out,” I told Heath. “I want to go wash up.”

His expression fell, as though he’d expected me to thank him for what he’d just put me through. All traces of his earlier playfulness fled when he studied my face.

“No,” Gage growled. “You’ll stay right where you are.”

“But I’m—”

Heath’s disappointed gaze sharpened into something dangerous. “You’ll sit in your mess so you remember who you belong to.” He put his finger under my chin to force me to look into his eyes. “Who owns your pleasure.”

It seemed Asshole Heath had returned.

“Heath,” I growled. “If you think you get to just boss me around...”

The pack alpha calmly raised his hand. “We’ll head back to the den.”

Oliver appeared as if from nowhere, and I suddenly wondered if he’d been waiting for the Howling Echo to finish with me.

Now I really did bury my face in Flint’s chest.

“We’ll get you cleaned up back home,” he whispered to me. “They don’t want you out of their sight while you smell this good. Neither do I.”

My protective, caring alpha knew what I needed to hear. But I wasn’t so sure he was right. Gage had watched and reinforced Heath’s ploy by doubling down on my punishment. Flint kept trying to convince me otherwise, but this reminded me again that both Heath and Gage liked owning me — they weren’t looking to mate me. I wasn’t even sure they wanted me to join the pack.

They’d enjoy me, whenever and however they wanted, until this deal was through. But after that? I couldn’t assume anything would change.

Chapter 13

Freya

That night, I didn't talk to Gage or Heath again and shut myself up in my room. I again awoke in the middle of the night. Flint stood watch on the middle shift, and had apparently managed to slip away without waking me again. But part of me knew my mate was missing, and I woke to find Gage asleep in wolf form. And once again, as soon as I stirred, his golden eyes cracked open to check on me.

I shouldn't have been reassured. To him, I was just his temporary property. He wasn't protecting me for any other reason... right?

But then I recalled what he'd promised after killing the red wolf in the forest: And as for those who hurt you in the past, princess? I'll destroy them all. One day, we'll make both Ironwood and Frost Fang pay.

That wasn't part of our deal. It made me think he might be developing some kind of feelings for me. Still, I didn't trust him. I couldn't. The thought of anyone fighting on my behalf because they actually cared about me... all the wolves in my life had made it clear that wasn't something I could expect, especially from alphas. Except for Flint, who was my mate and was driven to protect me by his instincts.

So, I rolled with my back to Gage and went back to sleep. By the time I woke up, morning light streamed through the window. Flint was already gone again, but I could feel his warmth lingering in the bed beside me.

Outside the room, I could hear Heath and Gage's low voices, though I couldn't make out any words until Gage

corrected, “*when* we get there” before quieting down again.

The low rumble of their voices sent a surge of warmth through me, my body heating involuntarily. I did my best to ignore it, still troubled by last night.

Every time these men pushed my limits, my body responded by giving me the best orgasms of my life. Yet I always second-guessed my actions afterward. And once again, I couldn’t help but feel... dirty. I’d let them make me come in the middle of a crowded public space without so much as talking back.

Or making any noise at all. Had Heath and Gage commanded my silence because of the setting? Or because they didn’t want to be reminded that I was more than an object they could own?

My mate, Flint... I’d seen how much my enjoyment excited him. He wasn’t a complete gentleman. But I knew he cared about me. His gentle words and the way he’d held me to his chest afterward reminded me he did.

The other two... every time I’d been with them, they’d been using me for their pleasure or as reparation for my actions. And yet... they’d always given more than they’d taken.

From what I’d overheard other women in the Ironwood pack say, not all men were like that.

Most Ironwood women met their mates beneath the moon during a pack run and then spent the rest of their lives serving their mate’s desires. They weren’t allowed to bite their mates back for an equal mating — but apparently that was much more common outside of Ironwood. Yet Flint had wanted me to have an equal mating even before I realized he might be the one.

The thought of us biting each other someday, in the heat of the moment... my body lit up at the thought. My teeth itched, and for a moment, I swore I could feel them lengthening into fangs. With a gasp, I rushed over to the mirror. But my teeth looked normal. Just my imagination, then.

But inside of me, my wolf felt... smug. Like she knew a secret I didn't. Something about the mating bite, maybe? If I hoped to bite Flint back for an equal mating in the future, my wolf needed to show up.

"You're going to come out someday, right?" I begged my reflection in the mirror.

Maybe it was the light from the window, but something seemed to glint at the edge of my eye. I leaned in, hoping to catch sight of the wolf's golden color like I always saw in everyone else's irises when their wolf was close to the surface. But no, that stubborn pale-blue color persisted.

As I gazed upon my reflection, I wondered why Heath kept insisting on taking my voice. Didn't he realize how powerless I'd been all my life? Maybe that's what had sent me into a spiral afterward, despite how good they'd made me feel.

And yet... Even when Heath used me and made me come without a sound the first time, he'd still wanted me to come. And this time... this time he hadn't stormed off, leaving me alone and uncertain. He'd praised me.

Thinking back, I reexamined the way Heath had acted in the restaurant yesterday. Now that I thought about it, he seemed a little jealous of the attention I'd been giving Flint. He'd repeatedly stolen back my attention, or made me look at Gage.

Heath had seemed pleased by my reactions to his 'punishment' right up until the end. It was as though the downturn in my mood had also brought him down. He must have expected a different outcome. And when he hadn't gotten the reaction he wanted, he'd turned angry. I'd disappointed him, somehow.

Things between Heath and I were messed up, but I felt like I discovered a piece of the puzzle when I remembered how he'd promised that last night was about me. They'd made me come without once suggesting they would use me for their own pleasure.

Maybe they didn't see me as just their plaything. They'd all been so turned on... When we returned to the safe house, they could have taken turns using my body to seek their own gratification according to the deal. But they hadn't. They'd given me space, they'd let me get cleaned up, and I'd felt Flint tucking me in as I drifted off to sleep.

I sighed and turned my back on my reflection, knowing I would find no answers there. Only time would tell whether Hugo's suggestion was true. If the date my adoptive mother had chosen for my birthday was even close to my real birthday, we still had months of waiting to see. And in the meantime, a different deadline was approaching.

My body felt primed and hungry today. If I'd woken up beside Flint, I would have been grinding my body against his already. He'd been so hard yesterday at the restaurant, but when we'd gotten back, he hadn't pressed me for anything, and I hadn't been in the mood to give it. To me, that meant my heat wasn't as close as the guys seemed to think it was.

But now... I wasn't so sure. I wanted sex, and I wanted it now. I remembered how hard Flint had felt under my hand, and I wanted that hardness inside of me. If I went out there, it would be the first time I'd propositioned him rather than the other way around or by mutual interest. My body buzzed with excitement and nervousness as my hand met the door knob.

But just as I turned it, I heard Gage's muffled voice on the other side much clearer than before.

"Any chance to fuck over Nira is a good one, as far as I'm concerned," he growled.

That name shot through me like lightning. Nira, the pack alpha of Frost Fang, had been on Ironwood packlands the night of my fake mating to Luka. She'd been the reason he'd rejected me in front of everyone. She indirectly brought about the worst day of my life.

But to Gage, Heath, and Flint, she'd once been their packmate. Gage's words left no doubt as to how he felt about her now.

I paused, waiting to hear more. Gage's footsteps moved back and forth outside my door. The house was tiny, so I was surprised he was taking a call inside. Usually he seemed to prefer privacy for that — away from me, the woman who wasn't his packmate, and never would be, because he still didn't like women. His words were a reminder of that fact.

“Yes, we can head out tomorrow.” He paused. “Will do.” After another pause, he growled, “Understood.”

His footsteps wandered to the front door, and I heard it bang closed behind him. Only then did I emerge from the safety of my room.

I looked around to find Flint and Heath in the kitchen. A wide smile cracked Heath's serious expression, but that smile soon dropped.

“What's on your mind, little wolf?”

I gestured toward the front door. “I... just remembered that Shante said Gage's father was the Frost Fang pack alpha. Is that why Gage hates women? Did she kill his father to become pack alpha?”

In some packs, pack alpha status was inherited, like how Luka would've become the Ironwood pack alpha after Jameson. But pack alpha status could also be taken in one-on-one combat.

Had Nira killed Gage's father and stolen his birthright? If so, I could understand why he hated her. Though that didn't explain his hatred of other women.

I glanced over at Flint as he turned off the burner and faced me. He and Heath shared a look.

“This is Gage's story to tell—” Heath started just as Flint answered, “No, Nira didn't kill Gage's father.”

Heath frowned and crossed his arms, and I came into the kitchen, hungry for breakfast, hungry for the story I'd been piecing together for so long... and still hungry for something else, but I pushed that hunger down. Now definitely wasn't the time. Not when I might finally understand what had happened before I met these men.

“She killed his brother,” Flint went on. “His littermate.”

Heath gave a short chuckle and shrugged as if to say, ‘I guess we’re doing this.’

Then he added, “That was after Garth fucked Nira right in front of Gage. His own brother bit and claimed her to prove she never actually loved Gage.”

I reeled in shock. “Nira... and Gage?”

Flint came to me and took my hand before kissing it. “Ancient history, moonbeam. This all happened after I was already kicked out of the pack. Why don’t we eat breakfast, and then Gage can answer any questions you have.”

“Maybe we should tell her, after all,” Heath muttered. “So that Gage doesn’t need to relive it.”

His concern for his packmate left me feeling a strange sort of jealousy. Why couldn’t he show me any of that kindness?

Flint set a full plate down in front of me. “Fine, where should we start?”

“This is why Gage hates women so much?” I asked. “Because of something one woman did? And after the way his own brother screwed him over, why doesn’t he hate men just as much?”

“No,” the venom in Heath’s voice surprised me. “Nira orchestrated her rise to power. There’s a lot more to it than that. She even played me against him at one point. She made me question why Garth was next in line to become pack alpha, not Gage.”

“Which was a valid question,” Flint pointed out as he fixed himself a plate.

“Yes, but it was because she was busy seducing Gage at the time,” Heath growled. “She saw Gage as her ticket to power in a pack that wouldn’t normally recognize female leadership. She wanted them to become the alpha pair. But Gage didn’t want to betray his brother or his father’s trust by challenging Garth for pack alpha. When she realized Gage wouldn’t give her what she wanted, she began plotting behind

his back. Nira got all of his father's mates on her side. After the old pack alpha died, she convinced all of them to support Garth, even Gage's own mother."

"But that was always the plan," Flint pointed out. "For Garth to become the next pack alpha."

"True, but Nira was always a few steps ahead. She knew that once Garth claimed her as his mate, she couldn't act against him without him sensing it through the mate bond," Heath said. "So, she needed allies. Since Garth didn't allow her to bite him back, he had all the power. He could sense her sneaking around behind his back. He thought she was cheating on him with Gage again, and she encouraged his jealousy. She wanted Gage out of the picture."

"But Nira and Garth were already the alpha pair." I shook my head, not understanding her motivations. "She had the power she wanted. Why did she care about Gage?"

I'd never wanted power over others. Only power over my own life, to live on my own terms. Her motivations made no sense to me.

Heath snuck in a bite while I was talking, and he swallowed before answering. "That wasn't good enough for Nira. With the one-sided mate bond, Garth still had more power than she did. But she knew that if she acted against Garth, Gage would challenge her for pack alpha status. She couldn't beat Garth or Gage alpha-on-alpha through combat. So she encouraged Garth's jealousy, and he eventually kicked Gage out of the pack."

"His own brother," Flint growled. "His own littermate."

Heath nodded. "I followed Gage into exile. It was only later that we learned Garth had been killed, and Nira had taken over as the sole pack alpha. To thwart the mate bond, Nira probably got the other women to do the deed, but we knew who was really behind it."

I stared at the two of them as I processed everything Heath had just informed me. Flint frowned, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

“So that’s why Gage reacted the way he did when you brought me back to camp,” I said in a low voice, squeezing Flint’s hand.

“I was unaware of most of this at the time,” Flint said apologetically. “If I’d known every woman in his life had screwed him over...”

“You still would’ve brought Freya back to us,” Heath said with confidence. His gaze slid over to me. “The Howling Echo is a pack of rejects. We were all exiled from our packs for different reasons, but not for just causes. Freya belongs with us.”

His words hit me like a punch to the gut... because they were true. Flint had been exiled for something his sister did. Gage had been exiled because Nira had used his brother’s jealousy as a weapon against them both. And Heath had gone with Gage out of loyalty. Though something in his words told me there might have been more to it than that.

Like them, I’d been exiled for something that wasn’t my fault.

But to say I belong with them? Maybe I’d misread their actions last night. Maybe they did see me staying with the Howling Echo beyond the deal. Joining them... mating them? Everything was suddenly more uncertain than it had been moments ago, and right now, I knew only one thing for certain.

I craved more. I wanted to know these men inside and out. An overwhelming sense of belonging washed over me, starting with my wolf.

My pack now, she whispered to me.

Could Heath really go from seeing me as his plaything — to considering me his packmate? Because he was right — I belonged with them. My wolf wanted to join their pack just as much as I did.

“Freya...” Heath started, moving his hand to cover mine. “About yesterday...”

He trailed off, and both alphas glanced toward the door before my half-breed hearing caught a sound. Gage came through with a drink tray with four steaming to-go cups. I inhaled the glorious scent of coffee.

But when Gage's sky-blue gaze landed on us, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. Maybe something in the pack bond with Heath and Flint tipped him off, because he set the drinks down in front of us and demanded, "What happened while I was gone?"

"Oh, just a history lesson for Freya," Heath waved him off.

"Heath..." Gage growled.

"Since our next mission involves Nira, they told me what she did," I said, not wanting him to get all bent out of shape over it.

But I should've known better. Gage's expression grew stormy as his gaze flicked among the three of us.

"I should have been the one to tell her about Nira."

"Yes, you should have." I got to my feet as his annoyance fed my own. "After all, the way you've treated me from the very beginning all comes down to her, doesn't it?"

"Freya," Flint grabbed my hand again, but he didn't get a chance to say more because Gage whirled on me.

"You were an outsider. You were hiding things from us, and suspicious for your own reasons. It had nothing to do with her."

"You just assumed I was a backstabber like Nira, didn't you?" I met his stormy expression with one of my own, not looking away. "My secrets were none of your business. I couldn't trust you, either!"

Gage crossed his arms. "Then what's the problem? We all kept secrets, because we didn't trust each other yet."

"The problem is that I was somehow taking the blame for something Nira did. I'm always the lowest in the hierarchy, the one everyone takes advantage of. And it's the same with this deal, isn't it?"

Gage's lips parted to speak, but I got there first.

I snarled, "I'm meant to serve you 'whenever and however' you want. All because some other woman hurt you and betrayed you. So, I get the fallout from it? But I get it. You don't let women in. And even if you did, why should it be me? I'm just a double-cursed half-breed who can't shift, definitely not good enough for the Howling Echo."

My words choked off on a sob at the end, but I refused to cry in front of Gage. He'd probably just think I was using my tears as a ploy like women always did. That was how his mind worked.

Instead of getting into my space and challenging me like he had in the past, Gage surprised me by stepping back.

"Heath, Flint. Get out."

My knees wobbled at the alpha command in his voice, even though it wasn't directed at me. The two of them got up from their chairs, but they were alphas, too. Flint fought against Gage's power over him to give me a quick kiss on the forehead.

Heath grabbed their jackets from the hanger by the door before they left. "We'll be back with supplies for the job tomorrow."

Just like that, the two of them took their coffees and left Gage and me alone. The house fell silent around us, and I dared to meet the alpha's gaze once more.

Chapter 14

Gage

Unfamiliar emotions blazed through me as my two packmates left me alone to deal with Freya. Pride at Flint for trusting me with his mate's safety, despite my anger. Annoyance at Heath for giving away my secrets. And a strange sort of fear that this would change how Freya felt about me.

But alphas didn't feel fear, they felt anger. That's what my father had instilled in Garth and me. After a lifetime of converting every unwanted emotion into anger, I wasn't sure how to stop, even when I wanted to.

And so that anger turned on Freya now.

"We have a deal," I said in a low, dangerous voice. "A deal you benefit from. We've put our lives on the line for you more than once. Is that not good enough for you? Now you have to dredge up my painful past?"

I wanted to throw dishes on the floor and hear them shatter. I wanted to break the legs off the chairs and bash out some windows. I wanted to purge myself of this anger through violence.

But my iron control held strong as always.

"No, it's not good enough for me." Freya crossed her arms, glaring at me, though I noticed how glassy her eyes were. "You've been punishing me for misery another woman put you through. You take it out on me instead."

Another woman? Her choice of words stirred something in me. Was Freya... jealous?

Maybe it was because of the heat. After all, she hadn't liked us even looking at that female wolf in the restaurant.

Some small part of me dared to hope for more than just the heat. I hoped that this was a sign of a deeper connection between us, just like Flint said. His words had left an impression, and my head had been a mess ever since.

Maybe Freya's was too, because I had the feeling Flint hadn't just talked to Heath and me about it. She hadn't protested when Heath had gotten her off yesterday as I watched. In fact, it had seemed to turn her on even more.

To test my theory, I strode forward, forcing her to step back or get pushed back. As soon as her backside hit the wall behind her, the scent of her arousal bloomed in the air between us.

And suddenly my unwanted emotions had a different possible outlet instead of anger and violence. I caged her in with a hand on one side of her head, tilting her chin up to meet my gaze with the other. She'd been challenging me this entire conversation, refusing to avert her eyes. But I loved it. It drove my inner wolf wild with desire for her.

Bite her, he insisted. Make her ours.

And for the first time, when he said ours, I realized something. He wasn't saying 'ours,' as in his and mine... he would've just said 'mine' if that's what he meant, because me and my wolf were one. No, my wolf meant *ours*, like she belonged to the Howling Echo.

Maybe Flint was right, and our wolves already knew who her wolf would choose — all of us.

"There is no other woman," I told Freya. "Nira is nothing to me. If I ever come across her again, she'll be lucky if I don't tear her head from her neck for killing my littermate."

I lowered my nose to Freya's neck, to that spot where I'd once thought I would bite Nira to make her my mate. Now I knew better. When I inhaled Freya's scent, it consumed me, inside and out. Nira had never had a tenth of the grip over me as Freya now had.

But the alpha in me didn't want to let her know that. As the pack alpha, my power protected the pack. Because of that, I couldn't let anyone else have power over me.

Freya let out a tiny whimper as my lips grazed her neck.

Maybe Freya was right, and what Nira had done to my brother and to my old pack had left me twisted up. Maybe I couldn't find it within myself to fully trust Freya just yet. But damn, I wanted to.

So, I gave her just a tiny glimpse of the power she had, hoping my offering would be enough to satisfy her, to make her realize how much I craved her.

"You're the only woman I want, Freya."

I pulled back to look into her eyes, to let her see the truth in my own. She stood frozen against the wall, her fingers curled as if holding herself back, her expression torn as she bit her lip with desire even as her snow-blue gaze bored into me from beneath lowered brows. Maybe she was still mad at me.

I chuckled, the sound low in my throat. Maybe we both needed an outlet for unwanted emotions. And I knew just how to purge us of them.

"Take off your top," I demanded, letting a hint of my alpha power bleed into my voice.

She shook her head, her spine straightening as she stopped leaning against the wall and prepared herself to face off against me. My inner wolf loved it. He wanted his mate to challenge him so he could prove he was worthy of her.

"Your alpha-bark won't work on me, you know. I'm just a half-breed." She crossed her arms and looked away.

Once her wolf came out to play, her animal side would put to rest all her fears about her half-breed status. The witch of the woods could shift, even though she was also a hybrid. That gave me hope for Freya. But until then, I could address the other part of her fears.

"You think that makes you unworthy? No. But... before you can join the Howling Echo, you need to learn to obey your

pack alpha.”

As the dangerous edge of my tone hit her, she shivered, and I scented her arousal again, even as her expression shifted first to pensive, then to stubborn. She didn't want me to be the sweet gentleman that Flint was with her. That wasn't what turned her on about me.

She'd gone wild every time I'd pushed her — the first time on the kitchen table, when I'd denied her an orgasm for so long. The next time, when Heath and I took her in the woods near Alloy and reminded her she was ours. The time in the car when I'd made her come on my fingers before I showed her our den at Moonblessed. She loved it when I took control.

Just as I reached that realization, she confirmed it by looking up at me from under her lashes and saying, “Make me.”

I lunged at her, but she slipped beneath my arms, her body sliding against mine as she darted away. Unlike Heath, I wouldn't let her get away. Before she could make it down the hall — was the naughty girl intentionally leading me toward the bedrooms? — I grabbed her and pushed her against the wall.

I hooked my hand under the hem of her shirt and tore it over her head, hearing the fabric rip as she fought not to allow me. She whirled to face me, and I pinned her hips against the wall with my own, letting her feel my arousal as I tore her bra off next.

Her eyes lit up, but it wasn't with anger. Her lips parted on a moan as I ground myself against her. I placed one hand beneath her collarbone, pinning her to the wall as the other hand flipped open the button on her pants. I dragged them off her, along with her panties, and her eyes clouded over with desire. Her heat was drawing closer. I felt sure of it. But it wasn't here yet, which meant she could still decide for herself what she wanted.

“Unbutton my shirt,” I demanded without bothering to use my alpha-bark, since it wouldn't matter, anyway.

She glared up at me, but her hands went to the bottom button without protest. That confirmed it for me — she wanted this every bit as much as I did. Having her graceful fingers pulling my shirt away from my pants made me even harder. I couldn't wait to be free of my jeans, so I unbuttoned them myself.

Flint's worry through the pack bond caught my attention, and I sent him reassurances. No harm would come to Freya while she was with me.

Suddenly realizing she was only on the second button, I growled. She took her time, and I didn't have the patience. I yanked the shirt open, and buttons went flying everywhere as she gasped.

I wasn't sure what she was expecting, but clearly me kneeling before her wasn't it, because her eyes widened as I grabbed her ankle and raised it to my shoulder. Pinning her hips to the wall, I set about licking the sweet wetness from her thighs. She was more than ready for me, but now that I knew how much it drove her crazy to wait and beg for her orgasm, I planned to draw this out.

I'd wanted this ever since I threatened her last night... And I was glad she'd managed to "win," because I doubted any of us would've lasted those five days. Not that I'd ever tell her that.

"Gage," she moaned my name, making my balls tighten painfully.

I wanted to sink myself inside of her, but I decided to worship her like she deserved instead.

Her wild moan ignited something inside of me, and I went to town, eating her out like a starving man. She moaned and cried above me, her legs trembling. Leaning forward, her hands came down on my shoulders, but I chased her pussy with my mouth even as her nails clawed my shoulders.

But I didn't give her what she wanted. And when I stood up and wiped off my mouth, the wild look she gave me

gratified me to the core. I'd done that to her. I'd made her lust for me.

"I'm still mad at you," she growled. "Maybe even more than before. If you think this changes anything—"

I grabbed her up and threw her small body over my broad shoulder, making her yelp. I longed to bring my hand down on that tempting ass, but I'd promised never to hurt her. And I was too keyed up to be gentle right now.

"I'm not finished with you, princess," I told her as I kicked open the door to her room.

Every night, I'd guarded her bedside in my wolf form. She knew it was me. I could see it in her eyes when she woke up. And it pleased my wolf that she trusted us enough to go back to sleep under our watch.

I'd wanted to do so much more than watch, so I wasn't about to waste this chance. I locked down my control over the pack bond, refusing to broadcast anything to the pack like Flint had once done to us. None of them could know how deeply Freya affected me.

Waiting drove Freya wild, and so when I set her down, I forced her to her knees before me. Then I teased her lips with the head of my cock. I knew the words that would make more of that sweet wetness come gushing out for me.

"Open your mouth," I growled.

Sure enough, I scented her arousal even more powerfully than before, even though her lips clamped tightly closed.

"If you want to come today, you'll obey," I reminded her. "Don't make me say it again."

She glared up at me, but her lips parted, and I savored that expression as my dick slid inside the wet heat of her mouth. It wasn't where I wanted her, but I would remember this moment forever. Freya on her knees, glaring up at me as she sucked me as I'd ordered her to.

Her hand slid between her thighs and got soaked in her desire. Part of me wanted to deny her, but part of me loved

seeing her touching herself while her head bobbed up and down my length. It proved she wanted this every bit as much as I did.

Even as she submitted to me, she wasn't passive about it — no diverting her eyes, no instinctive cowering. Her fiery temper gave me a sense of freedom, knowing she would refuse anything she didn't want to do. And that glare... that just let me know she was impatient.

Freya was here because of the deal, her heat... because she was ours.

She sucked me down enthusiastically, looking up at me through her lashes. My naughty little princess was trying to break my control.

But our delicious hate-fuck had only just begun.

I pulled away from her and said, "Get up."

"I hate you more than ever," she growled as she rose to her feet.

I could see as her instincts warred against each other — demand what she wanted with all the power her wolf instinctively knew she held over me... or lean into our dynamic, which she knew would get her orgasms.

I didn't want to get into a battle of wills this time, though.

"On the bed," I growled back. "Now."

Turned on and shivering in anticipation, she scrambled on the bed on her hands and knees, presenting her ass to me, delighting my wolf. My dick was hard as steel, and as much as I wanted to sink it into the glorious sight before me, I couldn't give her what she wanted.

My ultimatums had made her go crazy last night — my power over her. My demands. My insistence that she acted how we wanted. She liked the fact that I took control.

And I loved it. So instead of plunging into her balls-deep like I wanted, I waited until she glanced over her shoulder at me in confusion before I said.

“On your back.”

“Yes, alpha,” she purred, playing obedient.

But when she laid down, her legs were closed and her arms were above her head, like she was waiting for me. So I grabbed my dick and started stroking myself, letting her see what she might miss out on.

“Do you want to come today?” I asked as I reached the tip and slid my hand back down.

“Of course I do!”

“Are you going to scream my name when you come on my cock?”

She huffed in annoyance, narrowed eyes searching for a trick. “If you let me come on your cock, alpha.”

“So you won’t mind if I come on your chest, then?” I teased her, getting closer to the bed while still stroking myself.

“You really piss me off, you know that?” She glared up at me. “What do you want me to say? Just tell me, and I’ll scream whatever you want while I’m coming.”

“Spread your legs and touch yourself for me.”

She threw her hands down on the bed in annoyance, her face turned away from me as she did as I asked. Her thighs fell open and her fingertips began teasing along her clit.

“I’m going to fuck you so hard you won’t want a cock in you for days,” I said as I took position between her thighs.

Still, she wouldn’t look at me. That wouldn’t work. With my hands on either side of her head, I teased my cock along her wet folds, making her gasp. Then I slid one hand behind her head, cradling it. Her eyes met mine in confusion as I tilted her head down until her chin nearly touched her chest.

“Watch as I enter you.”

Then my cockhead found her entrance, and I slid inside like I was meant to be there all along. Her wetness guided me all the way inside as Freya let out a long, low moan. My hips

came to rest against hers, and only then did I let her head fall back.

For a moment, I rested there, deep inside of her.

“You’re under our protection, Freya,” I whispered to her. “But it’s not because of the deal. Open your eyes and see what’s going on between you and me... between all of us.”

Curiosity bloomed in her eyes as our gazes locked. Her hands slid up my arms and around my back, pulling me closer to her. Our bodies rocked together for a moment before a smile teased at her lips.

When she gazed up at me through her lashes this time, she said, “What happened to that hard fuck you promised?”

I nipped at her ear and whispered in her ear, “Is that what you want from your alpha?”

To which she gasped, “Yes, alpha, please.”

I rose above her, slid all the way out, and then slammed home. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and I did it again two more times while my control lasted. Then I went wild, pistoning my hips as we sought our pleasure together.

With my upper body over her, she drank in the sight of my muscles, making me feel sexy for the first time in a long time. I slid one hand down to her clit, and her hips bucked beneath mine.

“Did you like it when Flint touched you while Heath finger-fucked you?” I asked.

“Yes, alpha,” she cried. “So much.”

“Did you like it when I watched you come all over Heath’s fingers?” I demanded.

“Yes, alpha. Please, I’m close,” she gasped. “What... what do you want me to say for you, alpha?”

I leaned in and ghosted a kiss across her upper lip as my hips fell forward against her again. Feeling her breath stutter against my mouth as she teetered on the edge nearly did me in.

“Whatever you want,” I whispered.

Then I swirled my fingers hard against her clit as I slammed home again.

Her mouth bumped against mine, and she moaned against my lips. “Gage, yes, please!”

My name fell from her lips over and over as she came on my cock, and I loved every second. Watching the ecstasy overcome her pushed me over the edge, and hearing my name in her sweet voice made an emotion bubble up that I refused to acknowledge.

Instead, I gave into the moment and let sensation take over, reveling in it all. The delightful gasps she made between calling my name. The softness of her hair falling over the hand that kept me above her. The feeling of her wetness on my fingertips. The clench of her inner walls around me... The glorious sensation of her milking me as I filled her up with my release.

Only then did I remember I’d once promised myself to wait until her heat before touching her again.

Some promises were made to be broken.

Chapter 15

Heath

When Flint and I returned from getting supplies for tomorrow's job — thanks to a loan against its pay — I already knew what we would find. I'd sensed it through the pack bond. Even though Gage had done a decent job of shielding us from it, his concentration had slipped a few times, letting his lust and satisfaction bleed through.

So I wasn't surprised when I opened the door to the scent of sex and Freya's sweet apple pie perfume. I hoped her heat would arrive soon, because I wasn't sure how much longer I could hold out against my desire for her.

Making her come apart at the restaurant had driven my wolf insane with the need to bite and claim her, but I knew we wouldn't be doing that any time soon. The way she'd looked at me after the scene in the restaurant made me realize she might never forgive me for trying to drive her away. And my attempts to bring her pleasure had driven the wedge even deeper between us.

I'd never expected she might not settle for only one mate. If Flint was right about that, and I'd managed to ruin things with Freya permanently... my wolf would never forgive me for letting our mate slip through our claws.

Flint might be equally unforgiving — I'd sensed his quiet displeasure with me through the bond since the night I'd fucked Freya and left her alone. Despite that, he'd been pushing me to make things right with her, to invite me into this mutual mating he envisioned.

I hoped I could, for both my sake and for our pack's.

Before we'd headed in, Flint and I made sure the supplies we'd acquired were loaded into the borrowed vehicle for tomorrow. Sooner or later, we would return to Moonblessed for our proper vehicles, but for now, we would have to deal with someone else's castoffs. I already hated the old Ford van, but we were stuck with it for this job, at least.

The house was quiet when we entered. Flint silently untied and toed off his moccasins, while my combat boots took me a bit longer. With a glance at one another, we headed for Freya's bedroom.

We all considered it her room because she was the only one who consistently slept there. And I was the only one who consistently didn't. Flint and Gage had taken turns keeping watch over her in there, but I'd known better than to think my presence would comfort her.

I'd hoped to start building bridges with her before her heat. But time was running out. I wasn't enough of a gentleman to let her ride out her heat without me.

Flint and I peeked into her bedroom to find our broad-shouldered pack alpha curled around the tiny form of a sleeping Freya, his heavy arm draped protectively across her slender body under the blankets. The tender look on his face tugged on my heartstrings, though I wasn't sure why until I felt jealousy burning in my gut.

Freya didn't so much as stir with all three of us crowded into her bedroom. My wolf felt content at seeing her resting. He knew she needed all the rest she could get before her heat hit. It was my human side feeling this jealousy, then. But why? I already knew I was no good for Freya, not really.

It was easy to think of all the reasons I shouldn't try to earn my place in her good graces. But seeing her face so peaceful in sleep made all my protectiveness and possessiveness come roaring right back against my intentions.

This wasn't all about Freya, though.

For as long as I could remember, Gage and I had been inseparable. We'd grown up together, we'd been best friends

our whole lives, and as a teen, I'd spent many nights thinking about kissing my best friend. But my father's teachings were always in the back of my mind. Gage and I were both destined to be married off for strategic alliances. Getting my feelings involved with Gage would only end badly for us both — if he even felt the same way.

Over the years, I'd come to realize that he didn't. We'd survived many tough situations together, and Gage had never once leaned on me as more than a packmate. Maybe that's part of what made the jealousy so strong now. His feelings toward Freya were obvious. He'd never felt a tenth of that for me.

Flint stepped away, saying, "I'll take the other room while you're on watch."

The fact that I sensed not a drip of jealousy from him annoyed me, even though he was right. It was almost time for our night watch to begin. We couldn't be too careful, especially with Ironwood on our tails.

Although the sun was already down, I still found myself reluctant to turn away from the sight before me. My heart longed for connection. I didn't want to wake Freya, but perhaps I could convince my best friend to give me a moment. I caught Gage's eyes, then jerked my chin toward the other room. I disrobed, unconcerned with nudity considering we'd all shifted around each other our entire adult lives.

In moments, I piled my clothes outside the bedroom and fell to all fours, letting my wolf push his way to the forefront. He was instantly disgruntled to be indoors. The night called to my wolf, and he wanted to see the moon for himself.

Gage frowned at me, and then slowly extricated himself from the blankets, causing Freya to roll onto her back with a soft sigh. Seeing them together made something physically ache inside of me. And the fact that they were so cute together made my self-loathing rise.

I headed toward the front door, and Gage let me out like an overgrown dog. A very, very big dog who filled the doorway. Alpha wolves stood a head taller — or more — compared to regular non-shifter wolves. By the time I headed into the yard

and turned around, Gage was in the middle of his shift. A split second later, he stood beside me.

“No shifting inside,” he grumbled.

The house had come with strict rules around shifter use — the owners didn’t want any damage to the place. As if three alphas couldn’t control their wolves. Ridiculous.

“I wanted your attention.”

Gage trotted off, starting a perimeter check, which was supposed to be my job at the moment. I fell into lockstep beside him, just two wolves loping around a house on the outskirts of town.

“You jealous?” Gage asked, probably sensing it pouring off of me in a torrential downpour.

Lying was out of the question. But he didn’t have to know that my jealousy came from them both.

“Yep,” I admitted. *“But it’s my own fault for pushing her away.”*

“Looked like she enjoyed herself at the restaurant.”

“Not that she’ll ever admit it.”

“True.”

Gathering my courage, I said, *“I wanted to get your thoughts on something.”*

“The answer is no,” Gage insisted.

He hadn’t even heard me out yet.

“You don’t even know the question!”

“If you want my permission to relieve your blue balls in town, the answer is no. Freya is too close to her heat, and if she smells someone else on you—”

My growl cut him off. *“Whoa, okay, that was totally not the question. And I’m kinda pissed you think so little of me. You saw me turn away Tork, after all.”*

“That was before you pissed off Freya.”

I chuffed my frustration. *“I fucked up, I know. But none of that matters right now. I can’t believe I have to remind you that we have a job tomorrow.”*

“I haven’t forgotten.”

My pack alpha nipped at my shoulder for my insolence, but I danced aside, still keeping pace with him as we scouted the woods behind the house.

“Okay, so when do you plan to let Freya in on the pack bond, then?” I challenged.

He scoffed. *“Is this some crazy ploy to make Freya forgive you?”*

“No.” Maybe.

“Right...”

“We’re about to go on another job, and we don’t know when her heat will start. She can’t be packless. It puts her at too great of a risk.”

“Heath...”

“She needs the mark of her pack to survive what’s coming.”

A mate mark would be better, but what would happen if Flint bit her now? Her heat might start... and Gage and I might never get the chance to find out if Flint was right — if her wolf really would choose more than one. Something told me we needed to wait until her wolf showed up before anyone tried to claim her, or else she might be locked into just one mate after all.

To my surprise, another voice answered me via the pack bond. Flint had shifted, and though he wasn’t visible to us from this part of the woods, he was close enough to ‘hear’ our telepathic conversation, since we’d been broadcasting across the pack bond.

“I thought we agreed to keep this job simple for Freya’s safety.”

“We will,” Gage growled. “There’s no need for me to give her the pack mark yet.”

“But there’s no reason to put it off,” I pointed out.

“Look, we’ll just do the recon and get out before her heat, let her ride it out with whichever of us she chooses, and then proceed to the next part of the job,” Gage reasoned.

But now Flint switched sides. *“Still, there’s no reason for you to withhold the pack bond from her.”*

“Exactly,” I said triumphantly.

“Her heat may force her shift,” Gage insisted. “Then we can do the proper pack bonding ceremony, and we’ll have another shifter with us for the next part of the job.”

I growled at him. *“After her heat, she might not be on the team anymore, Gage. Why would she stay after the deal when we’ve shown her no loyalty?”*

A spike of anxiety pricked me through the bond, proving that my words affected Gage more than he wanted to admit.

He gruffly answered, *“We’ll uphold our end of the agreement. What she chooses to do afterward is on her.”*

“She wants to join our pack,” Flint told him. “She’s always wanted a pack to belong with. And since she’s going to choose us as her mates—”

“You don’t know that for sure,” I blurted.

“True, you have some groveling to do.” Flint’s amusement at my expense instantly made my hackles rise.

Some part of me needed Freya to be bound to our pack. I wanted assurance that she wouldn’t just disappear on us when the heat ended and she was free to seek out a new pack — a pack that treated her better. Though I doubted she would go back to the Moonblessed pack and bring Ironwood to their doorstep again, that didn’t mean she would choose us.

Or, she might choose Flint as her mate. If she did, I would respect her decision. Even though sensing their joy with each

other through the pack bond would kill me, it would be worthwhile to ensure Freya's continued safety.

And that's when I realized I knew how to force Gage's hand, win back Freya's trust, and protect her, all at the same time.

"I can feel you thinking hard over there," Gage grumbled.

"I can handle my turn at watch alone, you know." I slammed my shoulder into his, pushing him back toward the house. *"Both of you, get some sleep before we hit the road tomorrow."*

Neither of them answered me right away, but Gage did veer off and head for the house. *"You're right... but why do I feel like you have ulterior motives?"*

"I'm not going to town!" I insisted, annoyed that he still thought I would stab Freya in the back like that when her heat was so close.

"Good. Then I'm going to curl up with Freya until it's my turn to stand watch."

Later that night, when it was Flint's turn, I took his place in the other bedroom, falling into a fitful sleep in which I dreamed of being the one to hold Freya in my arms as I slept.

By the time I got up early the next morning, Gage was on watch, and Flint was already up preparing breakfast. I could smell Freya's scent on him, which meant that, when Flint had returned from his turn in the middle of the night, he'd taken Gage's place in Freya's bed. My jealousy knew no bounds, and when my wolf hearing picked up the telltale sounds of Freya getting out of bed, I decided to enact my somewhat devious plan before the end of Gage's watch.

It was time to suck it up and grovel, just like Flint suggested.

I gently rapped on Freya's door and heard her sharp intake of breath. When she came to the door, her hair was delightfully mussed from a night of being passed back and forth between two alphas. My jealousy roared back so hard, I almost needed to clutch my chest to get it to stop.

“What’s the matter?” Freya asked, her snow-blue gaze scanning me from head to toe.

“Do you... mind if I come in?” I asked, searching her face for any sign that she’d begun to forgive me.

Instead, the walls came up, and she crossed her arms over her chest. “Let’s go into the living room instead.”

My heart fell, and I knew I needed to make this good. As an alpha, and as part of the deal, I had every right to force the issue, to make her let me in. But forcing the issue was exactly what had messed things up between us.

“Of course.”

So instead, I followed her like a puppy.

Freya settled into a chair, and I sat down on the footstool in front of her. She regarded me warily as I gathered my thoughts.

“Freya... I’ve been thinking. Do you still want to join the Howling Echo?”

She turned her head away as if considering it, then side-eyed me. Clearly, I was fucking this up already.

My father should be glad I never went into politics after him. I seemed to have lost his knack for winning people over when it came to Freya. But perhaps the best course of action was simply to lay it all out.

“Look, Freya, I get that you have no reason to trust me. I wanted to drive you crazy at Dark Potion, but I know I messed up.”

“Why do you always take my voice, Heath?” she whispered, and my heart shattered.

The lack of connection was killing me. I risked grabbing her hand. “I know I’ve been an ass. You get me so twisted up. I’m sorry for that, for making you feel...”

“Used?” She glared at me, pulling her hand away. “Like a piece of ass you threw away after you had what you wanted.”

I sighed and ran my fingers through my hair. “Yes. All of that. And what’s worse is that I... intended to make you feel that way. Because I wanted you to choose Flint, not me. You have every right to be mad at me.”

She tilted her head, giving me a quizzical look.

I waved her off, unwilling to admit I hoped that Flint was right, that her wolf really would choose all of us... choose me.

“All I mean to say is, I’m sorry, and I think Gage will give you the pack mark... if you still want it.”

I wasn’t sure what I was expecting, but what happened next wasn’t it.

Freya jumped out of the chair and lunged past me. “I have to go pee!” she yelled as she passed.

Part of me almost chuckled, but another part of me felt certain this was just her way of avoiding me. I’d failed. And Gage would probably kick my ass for bringing it up to her.

Chapter 16

Freya

I could feel the wolves circling outside the bathroom door as my anxious bladder clammed up.

“Go away!” I grumbled. “Stop listening to me pee!”

Since Heath had ambushed me right after I’d awakened, I hadn’t had to chance to answer nature’s call yet. But it was also an excuse to think through everything in solitude.

As soon as they could shift, teenagers swore their loyalty to the pack they’d been born in. They would shift into their wolves, showing that they had control over their animal side. Then they would give the pack alpha their loyalty with all of their being — human and wolf. The pack alpha would also shift and bite them to bestow the pack mark, which would scar and never fade. The mark would remain no matter which form the new pack member shifted into.

Why would Heath dangle pack status in front of my face when he knew I couldn’t shift? That’s why Ironwood had never given me their pack mark, after all.

Male voices discussed something amongst themselves before footsteps wandered off. A few minutes later, I finally emerged to find breakfast was ready.

“You know,” I told Flint, “if you’d wake me when you get up, I could help out.”

Heath appeared in the doorway, his expression cautiously hopeful. I really didn’t know what he was playing at now. First, he said he’d been an ass to me on purpose, as if that would make me somehow more likely to forgive him?

And then he made it sound like I could just... join their pack if I wanted to.

“I can’t shift, so why are you tantalizing me with the pack bond?”

My irritation and annoyance at him snapped into place. But just then, Gage came in through the front door. His pants were on but unbuttoned, and he’d balled up his shirt in his fist. My eyes ate up his well-built upper body, remembering last night.

We’d started out with some kind of anger-banging and ended up doing something that somehow felt almost... soft. As soft as Gage got, anyway.

Flint came over with a plate he’d made for me, and suddenly, it felt like too much. My feelings were all over the place with these three.

“Is this some kind of trick?” I asked Heath.

He instantly stepped forward and pushed a piece of my hair behind my ear. His hungry gaze felt far too heavy and full of promises.

“Remember how I once promised to beat Gage’s head in until he agreed to let you join the pack?”

I remembered. It was after I’d run away from the cabin at Alloy. Heath had chased me, killed some Ironwood wolves to protect me, then told me he and Gage were too dangerous for me. I glanced over at Gage, my body flushing as I recalled the ‘reminders’ they’d given me after that about who I belonged to.

I shook my head, focusing on the present. “Did you guys fight while I was sleeping?”

I supposed they could’ve healed already, thanks to their shifter gifts. Healing abilities I would’ve loved to have back in Ironwood, with all the beatings I received.

Heath’s hand moved through his hair. He was acting a lot more nervous than I’d ever seen from him before.

“No violence necessary. Gage is a big softie when it comes to you...”

He trailed off as his pack alpha let out a growl that sounded every bit like he was still in wolf form.

I chuckled. “I don’t think he’s gone soft. He was angry the whole time he was fucking me last night.”

Heath barked a laugh. “I’m pretty sure that’s just how Gage shows his lo—” Heath coughed and repeated himself, “How Gage shows affection.”

Gage stepped toward Heath, who danced back with a grin on his face.

“What did you do, Heath?”

“He seems to have conveniently forgotten I can’t shift,” I said, crossing my arms.

Flint ran his warm hand down my back. “You don’t need to shift for Gage to mark you. Truthfully, only the pack alpha needs to shift.”

I shook my head. “What’s really going on here? Heath is acting weird, Gage is—”

Gage growled at Heath, then turned toward me. “Gage is what?”

“You’re both acting weird!” I rolled my eyes and then took a big bite of biscuit before I could put my foot in my mouth.

“Freya, will you swear your loyalty to the Howling Echo?” Heath asked.

“Pretty sure I already did.”

Gage straightened and turned toward me. Suddenly, all three of them seemed to regard me with way too much interest.

“Are we really about to do this?” I whispered.

Flint’s hand rubbed circles on my lower back. “If you’ll have us, the Howling Echo wants you, Freya.”

Heath nodded. “We want you to be safe, and you’ll be much safer in the pack bond. Even if you can’t talk to us telepathically without your wolf.”

I stared at Heath in confusion, then turned my stare on Gage. The two of them had done their best to drive me away. Gage had wanted me gone from day one. Heath had warmed to me, then turned ice cold. I still wasn’t sure I accepted his off-kilter apology. And Flint? He’d been the only one I could depend on for certain.

And now all three of them wanted me to stay? To join their pack?

No, I realized as I gazed at Gage. He hadn’t said that.

“Do you want me in your pack, alpha?” I asked him. “Will you mark me?”

I held my breath, knowing that at that moment, Gage could make or break me. If one more pack turned their back on me...

He moved forward with his wolfish grace, and both of his hands came up to my face. His sky-blue gaze hardened.

“You’re ours, no matter what. But Freya, you’ve never had a pack bond before. I want you to be sure of this. This isn’t part of the deal. You don’t have to do this.”

If his hand hadn’t been caressing my jaw just then, it might have hit the floor. For once, Gage was giving me the choice.

But then I remembered last night. He’d done the same thing, then. Instead of making me scream out his ownership over me while I was coming, he gave me the freedom to say whatever I wanted to. And instead of calling him alpha because that’s what he wanted to hear, I’d called him Gage, like he was my lover. Like I could claim him as mine.

As I gazed into his sky-blue eyes now, I realized my answer meant so much more to him than I ever thought possible. I wasn’t the only one terrified of being rejected right now. But if I backed away from this, would Gage ever invite me in again?

He dropped his hands and stepped back, his expression guarded. At last, I felt like I had enough of a window into Gage's history to finally understand him better. I knew what had turned him against women to begin with. And I had the feeling we'd straightened out his twisted view that somehow all women were as shitty as his ex and his father's mates.

That didn't mean he was fully ready to trust me. And I wasn't sure that I was ready to trust him or Heath.

But my wolf? She was all on board. Prowling around inside of me, she itched to go for a run. She wanted to lope alongside her packmates, to prove she belonged with them. I put my hand to my heart and closed my eyes, listening to her.

"Will you come out at last?" I asked her.

But she sat back on her haunches, her head tilted, as if listening and waiting for something.

I sighed and opened my eyes to find three men staring at me, their hopeful expressions at war with other emotions. Flint looked hopeful and excited. Heath looked hopeful and worried. Gage looked hopeful... but like he was steeling himself for the worst.

"My wolf wants to join the Howling Echo," I told them.

"And you, Freya?" Flint asked. "What do you want?"

Tears stung my eyes as I admitted, "I've wanted it for so long."

Gage took my hand and raised it to his lips. After planting a kiss to the back of my hand, he said, "Then come outside."

"Aren't we supposed to wait for the full moon or something?" I asked, my throat tight.

"Who cares?" Heath laughed, taking my plate away and gesturing for me to go outside.

"You know the Howling Echo doesn't stand on tradition," Gage reminded me. "But it's still good to have witnesses for this."

In the soft light of the morning, I followed him around the back of the house toward the woods. When I glanced over my shoulder, I saw Flint and Heath following me. I shivered, both from the morning chill and the sight of these two hot men watching me as they pursued me.

“We’ll be your witnesses, little wolf.”

Gage passed by several trees until he reached the edge of the forest. When he turned to face me, I realized he was standing beneath an apple tree. I smiled, and his eyes lit up, pleased I’d noticed.

Then Heath and Flint came up on either side of me to take my hands.

“Kneel,” Gage commanded.

Heath and Flint held me steady as I dropped to my knees before the pack alpha. Clenching my thighs together, I tried to remind myself this wasn’t a sexual thing. But after last night... it felt like Gage had unlocked the floodgates or something.

Heath groaned beside me, and Gage chuckled before getting serious again.

“Freya, do you swear loyalty to the Howling Echo pack?”

I repeated the words I’d said the day we made our deal. “I willingly give the Howling Echo my loyalty. I promise to serve the pack.”

“And the pack will serve you,” Gage responded. “And do you pledge to put your packmates ahead of all others, even your own blood family?”

I took a sharp breath. I didn’t know my family, but now that I knew more about these alphas, I wondered if they’d sworn to do the same. When I glanced up at Flint, his unwavering gaze told me he had. He’d given up his place in Frost Fang for his sister’s sake, but now he gave the Howling Echo his complete and total loyalty.

Knowing that gave my inner wolf a sense of belonging and peace. I might never know my family, but these men had become important to me. And now they were becoming my

pack. Family. Safety. Connection. All things I'd yearned for since I was old enough to understand I was different.

"I do," I answered. "I belong to the Howling Echo pack and will always put my packmates first."

"And we pledge our loyalty to you, as your packmates," Heath and Flint said simultaneously.

This pack may not have cared much for tradition, but they knew how this was supposed to go, and they were leading me through together, step by step.

"Now you must swear loyalty to me as your pack alpha."

Gage's words from yesterday seemed to echo in my ears. *Before you can join the Howling Echo, you need to learn to obey your pack alpha.*

And just like yesterday, I shivered, but looked up at him. "I pledge my loyalty to you, Gage of the Howling Echo, as my pack alpha."

"Good." He smirked down at me, then slowly unzipped his jeans.

My eyes watched his hand slide lower, and wetness coated my inner thighs. I realized what he was doing when I caught the heat building in his gaze. He was intentionally teasing me.

He must be thinking of yesterday, too, when he'd forced me to my knees and made me suck him off. Every fiber of my being wanted an encore performance, but that wasn't why we were out here, I reminded myself.

Still, the sight of Gage's hard length made me clench my legs together tighter. He let his pants fall and then took a step back to give himself space for the shift. In seconds, a massive wolf stood before me, looking me straight in the eyes.

With me on my knees, the massive alpha wolf towered over me. From this angle, I could see his white underbelly and legs. Dark gray fur crowned his head.

Only then did I realize I was staring, mesmerized, into his golden gaze, when I should avert my gaze before my new pack

alpha. With the other two still holding my hands, I dipped my head, causing my long hair to fall in front of my shoulders.

Then Heath presented my left arm, turning my wrist until it was palm-up. He held my elbow to extend my left arm forward toward Gage, who had previously bitten the guys on their left forearms. After this, I would carry a matching bite mark from our pack alpha. I steeled myself, my ab muscles tensing in anticipation.

“It will only hurt for a moment,” Flint reassured me from the other side.

I hissed when the wolf’s powerful jaws encircled my left wrist, but Gage bit down gently, fully in control of his wolf. His fangs broke the skin, and blood pooled around his lips for a moment before he licked the wound clean. As soon as he did so, the pain disappeared like it had never happened.

As Gage shifted back, I looked down at my forearm. A circular bite mark decorated my wrist at last. I’d been jealous of Wilder and Willow for so long for getting the chance to be accepted among the Ironwood pack, despite their poor rank in the hierarchy. Ironwood had never given me the chance.

But when Ironwood cast me out, the Howling Echo had been there to take me in. Not enthusiastically, at first, but even then they’d done more to protect me than Ironwood ever had. And now... they’d given me a place to belong, something I’d longed for my entire life.

I closed my eyes, sensing something unfamiliar in the back of my mind. My wolf’s ears perked up, and she stood up. I sensed her excitement... and then I could sense... Gage. His strength and power extended to me, sheltering me. Any other wolf shifter I met would know my pack alpha was a powerful, dominant wolf.

But then I remembered that Ironwood packmates had mentioned that Jameson could sense when they stepped out of line, and my heart rate spiked. Gage’s presence was instantly there in the back of my mind, reassuring me.

Strong hands lifted me up onto my feet. I opened my eyes as Gage pulled me into his arms.

“Just as you have sworn loyalty to me, I swear I will not abuse this power over you. You are now our packmate, the newest member of the Howling Echo pack.”

“You can... sense what I’m feeling, can’t you? But I can’t sense you back?”

“Only your strongest emotions, or when you’re in danger.”

“Sometimes our packmates’ strongest emotions will bleed into the bond, allowing us all to sense it,” Heath explained. “But as pack alpha, Gage can sense more than the rest of us.”

“I mainly use the pack bond to check on the safety of my pack.” Gage cupped my jaw with his hand. “I will keep you safe.”

“We all will,” Heath swore.

Gage’s sky-blue eyes searched mine. “You’re ours now, princess. For good.”

The way Gage held me was possessive, but somehow different from the way a pack alpha normally felt toward a new packmate, I was sure. Flint had given me his permission to be with his packmates — my packmates, now.

But had he expected this new thing blooming between Gage and me? Because right now, in Gage’s strong arms, I could almost believe in the possibility of... us. Now that they accepted me as their packmate, I could almost imagine them caring for me in other ways, of me being with them all, not only Flint.

I tilted my chin up. Whether it was from his newfound sense of my emotions through the pack bond or not, I couldn’t be sure, but Gage read my desires and met them. His lips descended on mine, but that only made me want more. I slid my arms around him, and his iron grip locked me against his hard body. It seemed the hard-on he’d been sporting before his shift had returned.

For a moment, I lost myself completely to the kiss. Gage's mouth plundered mine like it belonged to him and always had and — now — always would. I met his tongue with my own... Then I suddenly remembered we were outside, standing in front of Heath and Flint, and pulled back.

Gage withdrew and then placed a kiss on my forehead, stirring up a mix of feelings I didn't know how to handle. He'd treated me like he owned me, fucked me senseless, then cuddled me in bed, and now brought me into his pack.

My head was spinning with everything that had happened in the past few days. My brain was still making sense of it all, but it felt... good? Not perfect, but a good start to a better future.

Flint wrapped his muscular arms around me from behind. "Congratulations, Freya of the Howling Echo," he said.

I grinned. "That sounds right."

Flint nodded, then bent down to kiss me. Any fears I had that he felt any sort of jealousy about me and Gage disappeared. His kiss felt every bit as possessive as Gage's, yet... left me with the freedom to explore whatever might happen with his packmates.

My packmates, I reminded myself, glancing over at Heath, who held himself slightly apart from us. His jaw tensed, but he made no move to come closer as the moment stretched. Flint stepped back, but before I could decide how to celebrate with my third packmate, our pack alpha spoke up.

"Freya and Flint, pack up the house and all our clothes and things. Heath, you're on weapons and ammunition. Hurry and eat, because we leave by ten sharp."

"Got it, boss," Heath said, turning his back on us.

Without a backward glance, he strode across the field back toward the house.

My heart splintered a little, and I mentally chastised myself for being greedy. Flint and I worked well together. And there was definitely something deeper waiting to be explored

between Gage and me... It was silly to feel like something was missing.

“Get moving,” Gage growled as he started across the field after Heath.

“So bossy,” I laughed as Flint took my hand and led me along with him.

“You’ve sworn to obey me, don’t forget,” Gage warned.

“No, I swore to be loyal. There’s a difference.”

Up ahead of us, Heath turned around and called back, “At this rate, you’ll be back to hate-fucking in no time.”

“No time for fucking of any kind,” Gage growled. “That’s an order from your pack alpha.”

But when he glanced over his shoulder at me, Gage gave me a wolfish grin. I smiled back, curious to see what new side of Gage I might discover as his packmate.

“Once we’re back from this job, we’ll get you a tattoo to match,” Flint said, holding out his left forearm. A matching circle of teeth marks ringed his wrist just below a black tattoo of a wolf howling in the mountains.

I smiled and squeezed his hand. “I can hardly wait.”

It would be my first ever tattoo, and though I’d heard tattoos could hurt, I was ready. The bite had hurt too, but only temporarily. Out of all the pain I’d suffered in my life, it was nothing.

“We can’t either.” Flint’s grin lit up his face. “We want everyone, even the fae and vampires, to know that you’re ours.”

I loved seeing the possessive side of Flint.

Back at the house, we all moved to do our assigned jobs. As I watched Gage and Heath work together to load up the old Ford van, I marveled at actually being part of their pack, at the pack bond in the back of my mind.

The bond tied us together, though Gage’s presence was clearer in my mind than the others. I could actually feel his

pride and confidence in his packmates bleeding over to me, and it made me respect Gage even more.

We were the Howling Echo. To anyone else, we might look like a pack of exiles, rejects, and rogue alphas. But we were so much more than that.

I had never experienced such a profound sense of belonging until now. My adoptive mother had described the sense of comfort and safety the pack bond would give me, back when we both assumed I'd shift as a teenager. Instead, the Ironwood pack had either pitied or bullied me.

But now, as part of the Howling Echo... I finally knew what she meant. We were connected, and what hurt one would hurt us all. Threatening one meant threatening us all.

I started to believe I would never again have to face anyone — or anything— alone.

Chapter 17

Freya

We traveled for three days through the mountains in order to circle around to the backside of Frost Fang pack territory, on the opposite side from the Ironwood packlands. This part of the job was simple — meet with the informant from Frost Fang and report back the details on a secure transmission away from Frost Fang packlands.

It sounded like something out of a spy book I'd once gotten a chance to read as a teenager, before all my leisure time had been stripped away from me completely.

“Is Frost Fang really so advanced that they could tap into a phone call on their packlands?” I asked when I overheard Gage and Heath talking through the plan on the drive.

“I doubt it,” Heath answered.

Gage added, “They’re paying us to do it their way, so we’ll do whatever it takes to satisfy their paranoia.”

Eventually, we reached the rendezvous point not far from Frost Fang packlands. We were technically still in the wildlands, but close enough that Frost Fang could’ve taken issue with our presence if they caught our scent. The small, flat clearing made all of us a little uneasy.

But soon, an old, beat-up little sedan pulled into view with only one person inside — our informant. When she got out of the vehicle, the guys searched it anyway, guns drawn.

“Ingrid?” Heath asked, and she nodded.

Then she said, “Watermelon soup.”

I blinked, but Heath just nodded back. Apparently, that was the secret phrase they'd been expecting to hear, because he answered, "With a cedar sandwich."

I cringed in disgust. I could understand using unlikely phrases, but why did they have to choose such awful food-related combinations.

Ingrid's dark braids had begun to go gray, but her bearing revealed a spry youthfulness, and her tanned face wrinkled with an amused smile.

I smiled in return, hoping to put her at ease.

Then her nostrils flared and her eyes widened. "Why would you bring a woman in heat into danger like this?"

All three of them growled, and our informant crossed her arms, her dark eyes locked on me. "Are any of them your mate, dear?"

I pursed my lips, uncertain of whether I should answer.

Of course, my pack alpha answered for me. "You're here as our informant, not the other way around. We'll ask the questions."

But Ingrid came toward me, holding out her hands, palms up. I tentatively placed my hands in hers, and her eyes widened as she glanced me up and down.

"What is your name, child? How old are you?" she asked in a steady voice, unconcerned by the bristling alphas all around us.

"Ingrid," Gage growled.

"Before I was forced to join Frost Fang, I lived happily in the Nightsinger Pack," she said, ignoring the snarling alpha.

She showed a dark splotch on her forearm where an old pack mark used to be.

"I'm not happy to be pack bonded to Frost Fang, never was. But Nightsinger, ah, there was a good pack."

Flint stepped forward and grabbed her wrist, sniffing it. "My family were refugees from the Nightsinger pack."

“Yes, I remember your family traveling with mine to reach Frost Fang. We all hoped it would be a new beginning, a pack worthy of giving our loyalty to.”

Her frown told me what she thought of Frost Fang.

“But she,” Ingrid hooked a thumb over her shoulder at me, “was not originally from Nightsinger.”

Her statement jolted me to such a degree, it felt as though lightning had struck my body. This woman knew me? She knew where I’d come from before the Ironwood pack took me in?

“I knew your uncle Liam. He had dark hair, but when he took you in, he told me you looked just like your mother.”

“Did you know her?” I asked with my heart in my throat.

When Ingrid shook her head, my hopes crumbled. “Not really, no, but Liam told me what happened to your old pack, the Winter Wind.”

I sensed my packmates’ gazes on me, but my eyes were glued to Ingrid. “Please, can you tell me everything?” I glanced over at Gage. “Do we have time?”

“Will anyone notice your absence?” Gage asked Ingrid.

“None of them notice an old crone like me these days. I’m practically invisible,” Ingrid grumbled. “My own grandchildren rarely drop by.”

“We should still probably do the job first,” Heath hedged.

“Certainly,” she said, handing him a small USB drive that looked tiny in Heath’s large hand. “The drive is password protected, and the information is encrypted, but try not to lose it all the same.”

“Thank you,” Flint said with more sincerity than I imagined Heath or Gage could muster.

“Now, where was I?” she asked, patting my shoulder.

“You said Freya and her mother were originally from the Winter Wind pack,” Flint answered. “How did she come to be in Nightsinger, then? And why don’t I remember seeing her?”

His somber eyes fell on me, making me wonder if we'd ever met as children. But I could barely remember anything before I was adopted into the Ironwood pack, and Flint wasn't much older than me.

"She was just a toddler then, maybe three years old? And less than a year later, Nightsinger was no more," Ingrid pondered. "You couldn't have been much older than her. I remember two young pups with your parents."

"I was seven when my parents joined Frost Fang," Flint admitted.

"Exactly," Ingrid said, as if that settled everything. "Perhaps Nightsinger should've taken the fall of Winter Wind as a warning. Maybe we could've survived if we'd taken it more seriously, but... alas, we did not."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Denraider," Ingrid said, as if that was explanation enough.

Why did that pack name sound familiar?

Heath met my eyes. "The Denraider pack is well-known for conquering other packs and taking what they want, leaving the refugees to the mercy of neighboring packs."

Then I remembered. "The same pack who conquered Dawn Chaser, too?"

"The very same," Flint confirmed.

"And that's why we don't hear anything about Dawn Chaser, Nightsinger, or Winter Wind anymore," Gage explained. "They're all gone. Any survivors joined other packs... or took their chances in the wildlands."

I remembered the map in Gage's study back at Moonblessed. I didn't recall seeing any of those packlands listed on the map. They'd been wiped out.

Ingrid frowned. "Some say it was Lilith's fault that Denraider initially took interest in the Winter Wind pack." When we all looked at her in confusion, she added, "Your mother."

I treasured hearing my mother's name, even though I didn't understand why anyone blamed her.

“What? Why?”

It was one thing to learn more about my mother's history. Something else entirely to hear she might have brought it on herself.

“Because Lilith already had two wolf shifter mates when she took a mage for a mate as well. Denraider hates witches, even ones not affiliated with a coven.”

“Three mates?” I gasped, and for some reason recalled the memory of the woman from Snow Moon kissing the three wolf shifters who'd been involved in the Howling Echo's last job.

Ingrid nodded. “Your mother and your uncle were different from other wolves, truth be told. Their eyes never turned golden like other wolves when they shifted. They always stayed pale blue, just like yours. Rumor is that both littermates were late bloomers, but I didn't know Liam until he came to Nightsinger with Freya. Poor man never mated or married, but that made him the ideal person to take you in. Nightsinger was a bigger pack, and they thought a little hybrid like you might be safe with us.”

I was already shell-shocked by everything she'd just said when she added off-handedly, “I don't know what became of your sister.”

It was like I'd been struck dumb, so Flint asked for me, “Freya had a littermate?”

Ingrid laughed like he'd said something ridiculous. “Mage offspring are born singly, not in litters. No, this was Freya's older sister, a full-blooded wolf shifter whose littermate died at birth.”

“Why wasn't she with Freya?” Heath wondered.

Ingrid shrugged. “From what I pieced together, the girl didn't grow up in Nightsinger, but was exchanged with a rival pack as part of a peace treaty when she was very young, perhaps even before Freya was born. She may have been

exchanged with Denraider themselves, for all I know. I didn't want to pry. Liam was obviously torn up about what became of her."

She sniffed, and I wanted to reach out and shake her. This woman knew more about my family — and extended family — than anyone I'd ever met. But she still didn't know enough.

"Where is Liam now?" Gage asked, as if he could read my thoughts. Maybe the pack bond let him pick up my frustration, and he guessed at the source of it.

"Dead," Ingrid shook her head. "I'm sorry, child. He never made it out of Nightsinger packlands."

"And my mother and her mates?"

Ingrid shook her head. "Liam said Lilith didn't make it after the Winter Wind pack fell. He made it sound like her mates fought and died trying to protect her. I'm sorry, child."

My heart ached as though I were losing them all over again. Tears pricked my eyes, but I wiped them away. "I've spent my whole life wondering why they'd abandoned me. Thank you for telling me."

"They knew Denraider hated mages," Flint mused. "Since you were a hybrid, they left you behind to protect you. To draw away the enemy."

Ingrid nodded. "That's the way Liam described it to me." She gave me a gentle smile. "He said your mage father made a big spectacle of himself to draw Denraider's attention while Liam spirited you away."

My heart shattered at the thought of my father giving his life for mine. It stole my breath and made it impossible for me to think of what else I should ask.

"How late did Lilith and Liam shift?" Heath asked, surprising me.

While I was still reeling in shock, my three new packmates were trying to get as much information as they could on my behalf. The realization warmed me.

Ingrid shrugged. “I didn’t know him back then. He never told me how late. But it must have been after they turned twenty, at least. Unheard of.”

Twenty had come and gone for me already, but somehow Ingrid’s words gave me hope anyway. Maybe there was a reason I hadn’t shifted late, because maybe they’d shifted late, too. Except...

“Liam and my mother were full wolf shifters, weren’t they?”

“As far as I know.”

“Did Liam ever mention Freya being cursed?” Flint asked.

I silently thanked him with my eyes, and both he and Gage moved closer to me, lending me their strength.

“Cursed?” Ingrid pulled her braid over her shoulder and detangled a few strands at the end. “Well, he certainly had her magic bound, if you consider that a curse. But that was for your protection, dear. Couldn’t have you giving away the secret of your parentage with Denraider on the warpath. But surely it’s worn off by now.”

“It hasn’t,” I growled.

Gage cut me with a glance, making me realize I shouldn’t have given her that fact.

“Do you know who bound her magic?” Heath asked.

“With Lilith and her mates on the run or dead, Liam went to the only other witch he knew. Freya’s aunt. Her father’s sister.”

“Do you know her name and where to find her?” Gage asked through gritted teeth.

“Afraid not. I don’t mingle with mages, you know. Dangerous business.” She winked at me congenially, like I would agree with her that half my heritage was to be avoided.

“What about my father? Do you know anything about him?” I asked.

Ingrid raised her eyes to the sky as if searching her memory. “Liam may have mentioned the man’s name once, but I’m sorry... I can’t recall.”

“Did he ever mention the name of a coven?” Heath pressed.

Ingrid just frowned and shook her head. “Not that I remember.”

It seemed we’d run out of leads on my family.

“And Freya’s sister?” Flint asked a moment later. “Do you know her name?”

Ingrid opened her hands helplessly. “I’ve told you all I can remember, I’m sorry.”

Heath smiled tightly and stepped forward to lay a hand on her shoulder. “It’s okay. Thank you for telling us what you did know. Let’s give Freya a moment while we talk more about our original reason for risking our faces near our old packlands.”

“Does Gage intend to challenge for pack alpha?” Ingrid asked as Heath steered her away from us. I didn’t miss the look of hope in her eyes as she glanced over her shoulder at him.

But Gage stayed behind with me and Flint, and I didn’t hear how Heath answered her.

“If you think of anything else you’d like to ask her, just say the word,” Gage stared down at me with his intense sky-blue gaze.

Ever since I’d sworn my loyalty and joined his pack, I felt like an open book to him. Did pack alphas always pick up on their subordinates’ emotions so much?

“I wish she could remember more,” Flint mused. “Before she leaves, we should ask her if anyone else from Nightsinger might know more.”

“If they’re part of Frost Fang now, we can’t risk it,” Gage warned.

“Couldn’t Rowan—”

Flint cut himself off when Gage shook his head. I briefly recalled hearing that name mentioned before, but with everything else on my mind, it was the last item on a long list of things I had questions about.

“My aunt and my sister might still be alive,” I breathed, finding hope where I could.

“If both Lilith and Liam had blue eyes like yours, you should know your sister when you meet her,” Flint smiled at me.

“Though if she had a different father, maybe not.” I shook my head. “Who knows where she might be now?”

“She certainly wasn’t in Frost Fang,” Gage remarked. “I would’ve remembered seeing eyes like yours before.” He slid a hand through my long hair. “I’ve never met anyone like you.”

My body warmed at his words even though I knew he meant anyone who *looked* like me. And suddenly I wanted that hand in my hair to tighten so he could position me how he wanted me for a kiss. Gage’s nostrils flared as his gaze slid down my body.

Flint made a quiet sound, and his hands slid around my hips from behind, pulling me tight to him, my back to his hard chest. He whispered in my ear, “We should get you out of here.”

Gage nodded. “Before the whole pack smells her.” He fixed Flint with a stern glance. “You’re not helping.”

Flint’s chuckle in my ear had my panties instantly wet. “You started it.”

“Gage,” Heath called. “Anything else?”

The pack alpha raised his eyebrows at me, as though they’d given me a chance to think of any more questions. I pulled away from Flint to try to clear my head.

That was when I realized, “Brielle said the same person who cursed me as a child cursed me with the fake fated mate

bond.” I glanced back and forth between Gage and Flint. “That means my aunt was on Ironwood packlands at some point. She had to be, right? Can mages curse you from afar?”

Gage shrugged and glanced at Flint, whose lips pursed. “It might be possible. Do you remember any strange dreams in the nights leading up to that full moon?”

“I must be getting back,” Ingrid called from the other side of the clearing. “And you three should get her out of here before her heat hits. Try not to leave as the crow flies.”

I tilted my head in confusion, and Flint said, “She means a straight line. Because your scent would make it easy to track us.”

I sighed. My scent was forever getting us into trouble. If only my heat would show up already.

To be polite, I waved at Ingrid as she disappeared into the trees. Through the limbs, I caught sight of her removing her sling bag.

A few moments later, a mottled gray and brown wolf wearing a stuffed sling bag looked at us, her mouth open in a friendly expression before she trotted off into the woods. She stood at a more natural wolf size, larger than the domesticated dogs humans kept, but nothing compared to the size of my alphas.

My alphas, I thought to myself with a shake of my head.

But my inner wolf perked up and growled, *Mine*.

All three of them? I asked her, nervous for her answer.

I had a feeling I already knew what she would say. My mother had multiple mates. So had the Snow Moon woman I’d seen in the valley.

All of them, my wolf answered gleefully.

Chapter 18

Freya

As we walked back to our vehicle, sweat suddenly broke out across every inch of my skin, and I ripped my jacket off. My skin itched with the need to be touched. An ache centered between my legs, and the only thing I cared about was being filled.

I lunged for Flint, who wrapped an arm around my back but kept me moving forward, hurrying me along. “Let’s go, moonbeam.”

I gasped, “I think my heat is happening... right now!”

To my surprise, Heath took my hand, staring into my eyes for a moment before pulling me back toward our borrowed vehicle. “Yes, it’s here. But don’t worry, little wolf. We’ll take care of you.”

Everything seemed so bright it made me squint, and I wanted to dive into an ice bath. “How could you tell?”

“Your pupils are blown,” Heath said.

“You’re covered in sweat,” Flint added.

“Your scent is irresistible,” Gage growled from behind me. “We need to get you out of here ASAP.”

The growl from behind me made my wolf go wild inside of me. She wanted to run, to be chased, to make him prove himself just before she surrendered. My human body was just as excitable, and wetness drenched my panties all at once.

“Fuck,” Heath growled, my palm still in his. Then he glanced over at me. “You may start losing track of time, but

that's normal.”

“What?” I asked as Flint all but threw my suddenly languorous body into the backseat of the van.

It was becoming too hard to focus on anything but the alphas around me. Their intensity. Their smell. Their determination. Their desire.

I wanted them all, and they all wanted me. My wolf and I were in agreement: It was time to claim what I craved.

Flint slid in after me, and the moment I laid eyes on his handsome face, I lost all sense of anything else. My attention narrowed in on him, and I straddled him in the backseat. Dimly aware of doors closing and other men's voices, I ran my hands through Flint's long, perfect hair and groaned. Just the smooth, silky feeling against my palms turned me on so much I found my hips grinding into him.

His powerful arms circled me, crushing me to his chest. His lips met mine, and nothing else mattered. The kiss became my entire world as his soft lips guided mine into parting to let his tongue find mine. The sweet pleasure of our tongues dancing together made me want so much more, and I found my hips grinding harder against him. I groaned into his mouth when something rock solid met my core through my pants.

I pulled back and fumbled for the button of his jeans, but he pushed me off of him onto the backseat. I growled until I felt his firm hands ripping my pants down around my hips.

“Let me give you what you need, moonbeam,” he whispered, as two fingers delved into my heat.

I keened a wild sound, my body shivering with pure desire. His lips came down on mine again as his fingers plunged in and out of me. It was good, but in the back of my mind, I knew it wouldn't be enough. Still, my body was too delirious with need to care. My hips pistoned up and down, and his skilled fingers found my rhythm and matched it.

Flint's fingers curled so perfectly that I cried out and arched my back as pleasure hit me all at once. My body shuddered with release, but he didn't slow down, coaxing me

from one orgasm straight into another one with his thumb on my clit.

Only then did awareness return, as I overheard Gage and Heath arguing from the front seat. Something about the full moon. The van jolted over a bump, and I felt amazed that I'd stayed on the backseat while Flint drove me to climax. He gave me a tight smile and pulled me into his lap, my hair shrouding my face as a blush crept up my cheeks.

Gage and Heath were busy trying to get us out of here while I was screaming and moaning my head off. Hopefully once this heat was over, I'd stop being such a detriment to the pack's plans.

"I never knew the heat would be... like that," I said as I caught my breath.

Heath chuckled. "This isn't even the beginning."

"Turn around," Gage said, twisting around in the front seat to look at me.

Flint helped me rotate until my back was to his chest. Then he dragged my shirt over my head, leaving me completely naked. I wasn't even sure when my pants had come all the way off.

Gage's intense blue gaze scanned my body, and I heated with a combination of desire and shame. Flint hooked my knees over his just as Gage had once done, and then spread his legs, spreading me at the same time.

"You're so wet and ready," Flint whispered in my ear, his hands caressing up and down my body, making me wetter.

Gage smiled with approval, and wetness flooded from between my legs as his gaze devoured me.

"Touch her again, Flint. She likes being watched."

"Is that right?" he whispered in my ear, his hands sliding around my hips.

I shivered and nodded. As Flint's fingers found my core, a moan spilled from my mouth before I could stop it.

“Good girl,” Gage purred. “We can all smell your arousal. Now let us hear it.”

“I can’t wait to taste it,” Heath’s voice was rough, and his eyes flicked up to mine in the rearview mirror just as Flint’s fingers pierced me once again.

Sweat poured off of me, and I felt wild and wanton, being the only one naked in the vehicle while all three men remained clothed. I’d already come twice, but they wanted even more.

Flint’s iron-solid arm came up across my chest, holding me against him as Heath focused on driving. But Gage’s attention never strayed from me. His eyes darkened as Flint’s fingers pushed into me and then pulled out, circling my clit before going back in.

I moaned and writhed on his lap, feeling his erection trapped behind me. His hand cupped my breast, and I met Gage’s eyes as Flint’s fingers curled inside of me again.

“Yes, oh yes,” I moaned, feeling insane for letting them watch me like this, even though my body burned with desire for them all.

“That’s it,” Flint encouraged. “You can come whenever you want, as much as you want. No one will stop you this time.”

His words reminded me of all the times Gage had forced me to wait, to say I was theirs. I met his gaze, and he seemed to sense I needed something more. A push to send me over the edge.

“Not yet,” Gage said. “Not until you say what pack you belong to.”

“I—” I gasped as Flint’s fingers found the perfect spot inside of me.

“We need to hear you say it, princess,” the pack alpha admonished.

Too bad Flint’s hands were making it impossible to think, let alone get out any kind of coherent thought.

My blush deepened, feeling out of control. I got lost in sensation as Flint nibbled along my neck while grinding his palm against my clit. I was so close... so...

“Say it,” Heath growled savagely.

His command sent a dark thrill through me that pushed me over the edge.

“I belong to the Howling Echo!” I cried, stars dancing behind my eyes.

My body tried to curl forward as my abs clenched, but Flint’s powerful arm held me in place against his chest. My hips bucked, and I screamed out in ecstasy, my legs spread wide, my pleasure on display for my alphas.

Dragging his tongue across his lips, Gage’s eyes were fixated on the sight of Flint’s fingers relentlessly coaxing more pleasure from me.

That was the last thing I saw as my body went slack and my mind shut down. Flint’s fingers were still buried inside of me when sleep suddenly claimed me.

I woke up to a gentle swaying, but when I opened my eyes, I couldn’t see anything. I flailed, and someone pulled something off of my face. Gage was the one carrying me, and I looked down to find a blanket draped over me.

“We found a safe place we can stay for the next five days, princess. It’s not... ideal.”

He said the word regretfully, but as soon as he carried me across the threshold, the tension inside of me released. My wolf felt instantly relieved to be out of the open.

From what I could see, the first floor was an open floorplan with the kitchen in the back and windows opening into the forest beyond. Gage carried me upstairs, and the first bedroom he brought me to contained a king-sized bed that overlooked the forest through an enormous bay window. My wolf instantly hated it.

“Not this one,” I whispered.

Without hesitation, he carried me off to a different room. The next bedroom had one window with heavy drapes gathered to one side. The bed was only a queen, but I didn't care. My wolf wanted to hole up here in the safety of her darkened den.

"Yes," I breathed.

Gage laid me gently on the bed, and when I sat up, I realized I was naked beneath the blanket. He pulled the blinds to block out the outside, then turned to me as the other two filed in.

"You've been continuing to drink the contraceptive brew?" he asked.

"Of course, alpha," I answered.

I'd had it every day, even while running from the Ironwood pack. Especially while on the run... I couldn't afford to bring a child into this mess.

"Good." Gage's praise made me hungry for him, for all of them. "Then it'll stay in your system during the heat."

"Your body needs more rest before the heat hits in earnest," Heath warned.

They all looked so serious, and when I glanced at Heath, the question spilled from my lips before I'd even consciously thought it, "How do you know so much about the heat?"

He bowed his head. "Because I once helped a wolf through her heat."

"Your... mate?" I gasped, betrayal ripping a hole straight through my chest.

"No!" Heath rushed to reassure me, his eyes meeting mine and begging me to understand. "Her mate had died the previous year, and she hadn't chosen a new one yet. She knew I... had no interest in being mated with anyone. She said I felt... safe."

I snorted, thinking she hadn't known Heath very well, then. He'd told me himself he was dangerous.

Gage joined me on the bed, taking my hand. It disappeared between his two massive ones.

“We need to hear what you want, princess,” he said solemnly.

Heath nodded. “Once the heat truly begins...”

“That wasn’t the start of my heat?” I wasn’t sure how much more of this I could take.

“It’s here,” Heath reassured me. “That’s why we need to talk now.”

“You won’t be in your right mind,” Gage interrupted, as tactful as ever. “Not for the next five days. And during that time...”

He looked over at Heath for help.

“You’re going to beg us to fuck you in every way possible.”

“None of us will do anything you don’t want,” Flint reassured me. “We’ll know it’s the heat talking.”

“That’s why you have to tell us what you do and don’t want.” With an alpha snap in his voice, Gage added, “Now.”

I scoffed, looking from him to Heath. “What about the deal? You get to do whatever you want, remember?”

“No time to argue, princess,” Gage growled. “Say it. If you want me and Heath to sit this out—”

“No,” I growled, my wolf lunging inside of me.

I blushed as my body began heating up again. My three alphas just waited, listening.

“I... think I’ll need all three of you.”

Glancing over at Flint, I felt my whole body tense up. This was the first time I’d actually admitted out loud that I wanted them all, not just him.

Flint stepped forward to run a hand down my back, his fingers sliding through my long hair. “Whatever you need, moonbeam. You know I’m okay with it.”

I let out a long sigh. “This is really happening?”

It had been looming in the distance for weeks now, and it was hard to believe it was actually here. My wolf was bottled up, along with my magic. Why wouldn't my heat also be stuck? Part of me had assumed this was a false alarm.

“Definitely,” Heath said. “No question.”

An unexpected sense of relief washed over me. In five days, one of the major threats hanging over my head would disappear — no need to worry about attracting rogue alphas. And Ironwood would have a more challenging time tracking me by scent as well.

“Two of us will stay with you at all times,” Gage said with as much detachment as if he were setting up their turns at watch. “One of us will go out to get food. You should rest now while you can and then eat to keep up your strength for what's coming.”

I chuckled. “You make it sound like I'm about to turn into some kind of insatiable sex monster.”

Heath grinned. “You are.”

He stalked toward me on the bed, and I instantly tensed.

Gage straightened, squeezing my hand. “Freya...”

My pack alpha had sensed something even I wasn't aware of inside of me. Reluctance.

Gage hooked his finger under my chin, pulling me to face him as he searched my gaze. “Do you want Heath to sit this one out? He will if you say the word.”

“No,” I whispered. “I just...”

I shook free of Gage's grasp to face Heath.

“We just...” I shrugged. “I don't know where we stand anymore.”

Heath nodded, his disappointed expression instantly disappearing behind a neutral mask. “I understand.”

Complicated feelings for him made tears well up in my eyes. My newly arrived heat made me feel like I was standing at the edge of a precipice.

I trusted Flint to catch me when I fell. Gage would break my fall with his own body if he had to. But could I trust Heath or not? I wanted to...

"She does want you," Gage whispered, squeezing my hand. "She's just... torn. Right, princess?"

I nodded and sniffed, suddenly overwhelmed.

Heath sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed, far enough away that I couldn't touch him, and he couldn't touch me.

"You have no reason to trust me, little wolf. I understand that, and I'm sorry for it." He didn't look at me or the other two when he spoke. "But you can trust my packmates. They will skin me alive if I do anything to hurt you emotionally again. And you already know we promised not to hurt you in the physical sense."

He clenched and unclenched his fists, then turned to face me as if waiting for my verdict. My impending heat clouded my mind. Had Heath just... apologized to me?

"I know that," I said slowly.

"Good," he met my eyes this time. "Then I promise I will see you through the heat by doing whatever you'd like, nothing more. Afterward, when you're lucid and feeling like yourself again, you and I can work through whatever we need to work through. We can pick up where we left off... or we can forge a new path. It's entirely up to you. I don't have any expectations one way or another."

I nodded mutely, looking from him to the other two. That was my main fear about the heat. Not that I would lose my mind for five whole days. But that afterward... I might not feel the same way for any of these men.

Heath scooted closer to grab my other hand. "No matter what happens, you're my packmate, Freya. You always will be. We'll figure out how to get along over the years. But the

most important thing for you to know right now is that I care about you.”

My eyes widened at the sincerity in his voice, in his expression. This wasn't playful, flirty Heath or dangerous, dark Heath. This was a side of Heath I'd never seen... a side I'd like to know better.

Gage nodded beside me, probably sensing my reservations fading away.

A playful grin crept over Heath's face. “Now I hate to be crass, but... How do you feel about anal?”

I laughed, yanking my hand out of his grasp. “Wow, way to ruin the moment.”

Gage grinned. “He's right, though. We need to know beforehand. Once you're lost to your heat... you can't be trusted.”

I laughed. “Right, raging sex monster, got it.”

“Exactly,” Flint said.

That all three of them accepted what was about to happen... that they would set aside everything else for five days to take care of me... Overwhelming gratitude filled me.

I'd found my pack, and they would protect me. That's what they were trying to do right now — protect me from myself. Because once the heat began, apparently anything could happen.

That thought sobered me up. “I'm okay doing...” my hand flapped about awkwardly. “You know, the stuff we've been doing, with any and all of you. But as for anal...” I raised an eyebrow. “I'd like the first time to be while I'm aware enough to enjoy it.”

Everyone in the room went still as they processed my words.

“Do you mean...” Flint started.

“I mean right now, so I can experience it fully.” I smiled nervously. “I want all three of you at once.”

I'd experimented with a lot of things with Wilder when we'd dated, but none of the sex had ever really been great.

Conversely, the Howling Echo alphas pushed my limits and drove me wild with desire. Even if I sometimes had conflicted feelings afterward, I always enjoyed what we did together.

They always made sure of it.

Chapter 19

Freya

“If that’s what you want, moonbeam.” Flint’s hands went to the button in his jeans, and it was all I could do to stay on the bed, waiting for him.

I was still naked from the car ride, and I let the blanket fall from my shoulders, pooling around my body as Heath’s gaze darkened. But he didn’t make a move.

“Yes,” the word tore from my throat with a gravelly undertone I wasn’t used to as my wolf pushed forward inside of me.

Mates, she growled. *Claim them.*

I reeled at her clear words as Gage pulled me away from Flint, giving him space to get on the bed. Ever since Brielle explained the fated mate bond was fake, I’d known Flint was mine. But the other two, as well? My wolf made it clear she wanted them, but to actually claim them as mates? It still seemed surreal.

But, as Flint’s jeans fell, followed shortly by his briefs, I found I was quickly getting more comfortable with the idea. I drank in the sight of the smooth planes of Flint’s abs and the erection standing proudly in front of them. Wetness dripped down my thighs as I got to my knees and crawled toward him.

I didn’t care that it put me on display for Gage behind me or Heath on the bed beside me. Right now, all I cared about was filling the aching void between my thighs. And Flint was naked, deliciously hard, and more than ready to help. I rose on my knees to drape my arms around his neck as he stood beside the bed.

“I need you, Flint.” The words came out with a whine, and Flint glanced over my shoulder at Gage.

The two of them must have communicated something without words, because Flint sat down on the bed beside me.

“I’ll be on the bottom so you can ride me, moonbeam.”

“And I’ll get you ready for the rest,” Gage growled from behind me.

I reluctantly moved out of the way so Flint could lie beneath me. Before I could straddle him, brawny arms lifted me up and placed me over him. Flint grabbed the base of his dick, and I had one second to prepare before Gage lowered me directly onto him. Flint impaled me perfectly, and I groaned in pleasure as Gage slid me all the way down Flint’s long shaft. I cried out with the delicious stretch as soon as my hips hit his.

Then Gage let me take over. I rode Flint as his hands found my hips. Meanwhile, other hands pulled my hair behind my shoulders, and Gage began tugging on my nipples. The effect sent lightning coursing straight to my clit, and I gasped, curling over Flint as his thumb reinforced the pleasure for me.

I cried out, feeling wanton and on display as the three of them ran their hands all over my body while I rode Flint. Maybe I wasn’t supposed to come without another dick inside of me, but my body didn’t care. The orgasm caught me by surprise, making me double over, but Gage’s hand on my chest held me up, midair, as the climax shuddered through me. I came in front of all three of them, soaking Flint beneath me.

And yet, as soon as the climax faded, the ache between my thighs began again — even with Flint already filling me. I wanted another orgasm already.

“More,” I whispered, and Gage’s heavy hand slid up my back, pushing me down onto Flint’s chest.

Heath once again pulled my hair aside, so it wasn’t over my face. With my head nestled on Flint’s chest and his gentle thrusts relaxing me, I gazed up at Heath, remembering our last time together, when he’d been unrelenting, holding my hands back and not letting me see him. Tenderness filled his gaze

now, and he leaned down. His breath ghosted over my face, and I held my breath for a kiss. But his lips grazed my cheek on the way to my ear.

“Relax for us,” he whispered, just as I felt something cold and wet drizzle down my ass.

Then Heath stepped back, dragging off his shirt. He kept eye contact with me as his hands went to the button in his pants, and I clenched around Flint’s hardness inside of me. Gage’s fingers smoothed lube onto my back entrance, circling my hole, teasing me.

I gasped, and Flint’s muscular arms circled me, squeezing me to him reassuringly. “Tell us to stop and we will.”

“She wants this,” Gage said with confidence. “But I want to hear you say it anyway, princess.”

“Please, alphas,” I whispered.

His finger gently breeched my back entrance, then stilled. I clenched on Flint again, making him groan. His hips thrust gently against me as Gage pushed his finger deeper, lighting up nerve endings I never knew could feel so good. Meanwhile, Heath freed his cock from his pants and began stroking himself up and down.

“Yes,” I whispered as Gage added a second finger.

He scissored them open, and I understood at last what he’d meant about getting me ready.

“Will you let Heath prove himself, princess?” Gage asked, sliding both fingers deeper inside of me. “Will you let him take this sexy ass?”

I gasped with the pleasure, and at that moment, I trusted the three of them to do anything they wanted to me. They’d always taken care of me. Even when they challenged me, they made sure I always got what I needed in the end.

Heath’s powerful chest filled as he held his breath, waiting for my answer.

“Please, Heath,” I sighed as Gage withdrew his fingers. “But be gentle.”

Heath's gaze softened. "I'll take care of you, little wolf."

Gage's finger slid free of me, and I lost track of the pack alpha as Heath took up position behind me and Flint moved his legs. Then I felt Heath's crown fit against me and froze.

"Relax, little wolf," he reminded me as just his head breeched me. He held still, letting me adjust.

I gasped, grateful to Gage for taking his time getting me ready for this. Heath felt enormous as he slid deeper, filling me in a way I never could've imagined. But there was no pain — just pressure and the stirrings of pleasure.

I panted, and Heath paused, one hand making soothing motions on my back. "Breathe."

It suddenly occurred to me that maybe Gage had chosen Heath to do this not only to rebuild my trust, but because he had the most experience with it. Jealousy burned through my chest at the thought of the women and men Heath had been with before me.

Mine, my wolf growled possessively, but with total confidence. He was mine for the taking, and those who'd come before meant nothing to our future together.

"Can you take more?" Heath asked, bringing my attention back.

"Fuck," I groaned, trying to scoot back on him.

Heath's big hand pinned me to Flint's chest. "Let us move. We'll do the work. You just enjoy it."

With that, he slid deeper, making my eyes roll back in my head. At long last, I felt his body pressed against my rear, fully seated inside of me. I clenched, and all three of us moaned together. I'd never felt so full. But I needed movement.

"Do it," I said.

Slowly and carefully, the two alphas eased into a sawing motion, taking turns thrusting and withdrawing, lighting up nerves in the tiny membrane separating them. As they grew more sure they wouldn't hurt me, their rhythm sped up and pleasure suffused my entire body.

The feeling was indescribably satisfying, and only made better by the feelings bleeding over from Gage through the pack bond.

I couldn't believe this was actually happening. Two muscular men sandwiched me between them as both their dicks pierced my body. Two men who planned to fuck me again and again for the next five days.

"Yes," I gasped and groaned, "Please, fuck yes, perfect."

Words kept coming out without conscious thought as the two of them worked me over between them. Then suddenly, Gage stood in front of me at the edge of the bed, fully naked.

Just like before, the pack alpha growled, "Open your mouth."

As if I wasn't already dripping, a gush of wetness drenched Flint's cock once more as my mouth fell open in automatic compliance. I wasn't sure I could handle even more sensation, but I craved it all the same. I wanted to wrap my lips around him, feel the weight of him on my tongue, swallow down the taste of him. Gage's hand came to the back of my head as he guided me forward onto his cock.

The Howling Echo pack used my body, filling me in every way, bringing me more pleasure than I ever dreamed of. Sweat broke out across my body, and I lost myself in the moment, letting it all wash over me. But gradually, I grew desperate for release. It was so good, too good, feeling them all in me at the same time.

An image of what we must look like, all moving together, all connected, came to mind, and I must have made some small noise. Gage's hard eyes locked with mine as he relentlessly fucked my mouth, a dangerously sexy smirk on his lips.

"She's going to come for us," the pack alpha growled, no doubt sensing it across our bond.

I moaned around his cock as Flint and Heath kept thrusting inside of me, driving me wild.

"You're going to be a good girl and swallow."

Gage's dick hit the back of my throat just as Heath and Flint, together, bottomed out inside of me in a synchronized thrust, and I lost it. My climax centered on that thin membrane between them, but quickly radiated outward, making my whole body convulse. But the three of them kept me pinned just how they wanted me, and I screamed around Gage's cock as he moved in and out of my mouth at his own speed.

Heath pulsed in my ass first, and I felt his rhythm falter as my release triggered his own. My climax crested even higher when I felt Flint's heat filling me as well. My hands scrambled for purchase and found nothing but hard muscle around me as I kept coming.

"That's it," Gage said, and his release painted the back of my throat. "Swallow, princess."

His demanding words made me come that much harder as I obeyed, swallowing down his thick, salty ropes of release.

When he pulled his softening cock from my mouth, I licked my lips, looking up at him.

Gage met my gaze with a grin. "I'm going to love every minute of the next five days."

"Me too," I realized as Heath withdrew from me.

His steady hands guided me off of Flint's hips, and I collapsed between the two of them. My two broad-shouldered packmates and I barely fit on the bed together, but I felt delighted to be between them. I glanced over at Heath, still in disbelief. He reached up to my face, smoothing my hair back.

"How do you feel?"

Maybe it was the euphoria I was still riding, but I answered him honestly. "Amazing. I hope you'll still be like this after five days."

I wanted to explain what I meant about seeing a new side of him. But my eyes felt heavy, and I barely heard his words before I drifted off...

"I'll be here, little wolf. Don't worry. I'll take care of you no matter what happens."

In my dreams, a growling wolf circled me, and I found myself in a dark forest. I ran from him, but I wasn't afraid. His presence comforted me, even though I could barely see him in the trees thanks to his black coat.

Wait, a black coat? I felt a moment of confusion but couldn't remember why that didn't seem right. I'd figure it out later.

"You're safe with me, too," I said, even though I was the one running away from the wolf.

In the next instant, strong, calloused hands caught me, easily circling my waist. He pushed me to my hands and knees on a yellow blanket that looked so bright in contrast to the darkened forest.

The man behind me growled like a wolf, but I was wet and ready for him. I knew him, and I trusted him, because he was my mate.

His crown teased my entrance for only a moment before he slammed into me, filling me with one brutal stroke as he gave a guttural, primal growl. I cried out in pain and pleasure as he forced my body to stretch to accommodate his girth.

When I glanced back, the shadows of the forest shrouded his face except for his glowing, golden eyes. As he continued pounding into me, his low snarls and growls filled the forest, until I wasn't sure if he was truly man or beast.

"Please," I whispered to him. "Please, alpha."

I woke up with a start as something wet brushed against my forehead. Flint sat next to me in the darkened bedroom, and I realized he'd been holding a cold, damp cloth to my forehead.

"You should eat," Flint said before I was even fully aware of my surroundings.

"I dreamed of someone else," I blurted.

Flint kissed my forehead, and someone slid into bed beside me, making the bed dip with his weight.

“Eat this,” Heath ordered, and my stomach growled in response.

I sat up and allowed him to hold the sandwich to my lips for a bite. Then I snatched it from him, wolfing it down.

“We’ll take you to the bath next,” Flint stated with certainty, which made me growl around my sandwich.

After that dream, what I wanted more than anything was to come.

“None of us will hold a dream against you,” Heath said as if reading my mind.

“I feel bad,” I said with a mouthful of sandwich. “I have all three of you willing to do anything to take care of me, and here I am, dreaming of yet another wolf.”

Flint raised an eyebrow. “What did he look like?”

“His wolf?” I asked. “His coat was black. All black... except his forelegs.”

Heath went still beside me. Both of them stared at me with wide eyes.

“Anything else you remember?” Flint asked.

My heart pounded, wondering why they were so serious all of the sudden. “He chased me and then took me from behind, so I didn’t get a good look at his face. His eyes glowed gold, though, like his wolf was close to the surface. And he... growled the whole time.”

I felt embarrassed just saying it. Was this some sort of subconscious desire? A dark stranger, bestial and growling, in the forest? The dominance play and group sex was kinky enough for me right now without my subconscious adding to the pile.

“You were moaning, ‘please, alpha,’ in your sleep, over and over,” Flint admitted.

“Do you really think...” Heath’s wide eyes flicked from me to Flint and back again.

Flint fondly smoothed my hair away from my face. “You dreamed of our other packmate, Rowan.”

Chapter 20

Gage

“Raise your arm, moonbeam,” Flint whispered to Freya as he gently rocked his hips beneath the bathwater.

She moaned but obediently raised her arm to allow me to wash it. Freya straddled him, bouncing up and down on his cock while I bathed her.

“That’s a good girl,” Flint murmured. “Let your pack alpha take care of you.”

Having one of us fuck her while another bathed her was the only way we’d figured out how to keep her in the bathtub. Otherwise, she refused to cooperate, demanding cock the whole time.

Her raw desire — and perhaps her pheromones — kept all of us primed, but by now, on the fourth day? Our stamina was being severely tested.

“Do you think she’s this insatiable because of the full moon?” I asked.

It was the Full Harvest Moon tonight, and that meant our stamina wasn’t the only thing being tested. Heath was on watch now, and a few minutes ago, I’d heard him give into his wolf’s need to howl beneath the full moon and declare himself a powerful alpha, unafraid of any rogue alphas that might lurk nearby.

It wasn’t ideal, considering we were in unfamiliar territory and disadvantaged by Freya’s heat keeping us occupied. If any rogue alphas answered Heath’s challenge, I hoped they came

one at a time so he could easily handle them. We couldn't waste time healing, not when Freya needed us.

My wolf scratched and scrambled around inside of me, alternately demanding I bite Freya to make her our mate and demanding we all go outside for a pack run. Reminding my wolf that Freya couldn't run with us hadn't helped.

"Could be because of the full moon," Flint grunted as Freya slammed home on him again, causing the water to slosh over the side of the tub.

"Maybe it's because we're not her mate," I mused as I washed her legs as best I could beneath the water.

Freya had drained me dry earlier, causing Flint to take over for bath duty. I'd never had this problem before. I desperately wanted to get it back up for her, and my wolf felt permanently hungry for her... but physically, it just wasn't possible. It was frankly embarrassing, since it had never happened before. But Flint and Heath had experienced the same problem for about an hour each before they could get it back up again. Freya, in heat, had more stamina than all of us combined.

I'd never heard of such a thing between mated wolves, which made me wonder if that explained it, rather than the moon.

Flint raised Freya off his dick for a minute so I could wash between her legs. She moaned a complaint as I did so, and it wasn't long before her lusty gaze turned angry.

"More," she whined.

"We know, baby," Flint replied, stroking himself beneath the water to keep himself ready for her. "We'll take care of you."

"Where is Rowan?" she groaned.

Hearing our packmate's name fall from her lips when she'd never met him had surprised me the first time until Heath told me about her dream. It couldn't be coincidence. But it had reminded me to text Rowan to let him know we'd be unavailable for the next five days. I still hadn't even gotten the chance to check my phone for a reply since then, but I knew

he'd call if any emergencies came up that I needed to know about.

“More. Now,” she growled, her attention turning back to Flint.

From my understanding, she wasn't completely out of her mind. She wouldn't remember every minute of the past five days, but she was still aware of her surroundings and which of us were with her. She just... had zero self-control when it came to fucking us.

Case in point, I barely got her rinsed off before she climbed back aboard Flint. Like a gentleman, he held his dick steady as she pierced herself with him, and they both let out a moan. My dick twitched to life, already sensing my turn approaching.

She was as clean as we could get her for now, so I reached down and began stroking her clit as she rode my packmate.

“That's it, princess,” I growled. “Be a good girl and come on Flint's cock.”

In only moments, she obeyed, her body stuttering. Flint grabbed her hips, taking over control to move her up and down as I continued my attack on her clit. After her climax, Flint leaned back, expecting a moment of reprieve. None came, however, as Freya moaned and kept sliding up and down on him.

“It's almost your turn at watch,” I reminded Flint, my fingers circling her clit once more. “You may as well come with her next time.”

From the desperation in Flint's eyes, he wasn't far off, anyway. Still, he held on during Freya's second orgasm as she screamed both of our names. On the third orgasm, he joined her in release, and my dick stood fully at attention, ready to fulfill her needs next. It was a good thing, because it seemed Freya couldn't survive five minutes without a cock in her.

“Time for me to switch places with Heath,” Flint whispered into Freya's hair. “I'll be back before you know it.”

Freya sighed in frustration as Flint slid her off of him and pulled her out of the bathtub. I helped him towel her off, but her hands immediately went to my hard length as she moaned, “Mine.”

“Good luck,” Flint laughed, slapping me on the shoulder as he left.

I carried Freya to the bed as I heard the outside door open and close. My wolf felt restless, jealous that his packmates were out under the full moon without him. But when I sheathed myself in Freya’s ready, wet heat, that soothed him. A little, anyway.

Mate, he growled. Bite and claim.

The last few nights had been torture as my wolf became more and more insistent that I bite her. It was worse when the other two were gone, either making her food or taking their turns at watch overnight.

“That’s it, Freya,” I moaned as I forced her thighs wider, sliding out of her so I could slam home again. “Take what you need, princess.”

“Yes, please, yes,” she chanted.

“I’m yours,” I moaned, trying to drown out my wolf’s voice in my mind.

Fortunately, Freya’s cries helped with that. “Yes, Gage, yes, yes!”

“I want you every night from now until forever,” I confessed.

Freya likely wouldn’t remember all I’d said to her during her heat, which had given me a strange feeling of freedom to say whatever I wanted to her.

“This heat changes nothing,” I whispered as I leaned over her, kissing her neck.

I brought my lips dangerously close to the spot where mates traditionally marked each other. Breathing her in made me go insane.

“I’ll be yours for the next heat, too,” I swore. “And the one after that. And the one after that.”

My fangs lengthened as my jaw shifted, and that’s when I tore myself away, pulling free of Freya. I’d nearly lost control. To claim each other, mates partially shifted so they could bite each other with their fangs while still having sex. That my wolf had broken through with no warning?

My wolf never broke free like that. My chest heaved as I fought for control, and I left Freya laying on the bed unsatisfied. Maybe it was the full moon in combination with Freya’s heat testing my control, giving my wolf extra strength to take what he wanted. But biting Freya now would be a major breach of trust. I needed to know for sure that she wanted it, which meant I needed to wait.

Trying to tell that to my wolf meant nothing.

Claim her, he howled in my mind.

I tried to maintain my distance as I struggled for control, but Freya crawled onto my lap. She pushed me down on my back and climbed aboard, just as she’d done with Flint in the bath.

Watching her expression fill with pleasure as she took me into her was nearly my undoing.

“Fuck, yes, Freya,” I groaned. “Take what you need, baby.”

As long as she stayed above me, and I kept my fangs well clear of her neck, we would be okay.

“That’s a sight for sore eyes,” a warm, powerful voice said from the doorway.

Heath’s jeans tented with his erection as he stepped into the bedroom.

Of course, he was already hard. Freya’s moans did it for all of us.

His hands went to his zipper as he said, “Silly me, why did I even bother to get dressed?”

“Because you’re going to make Freya a smoothie,” I answered in a growl.

“Something she can eat while getting fucked,” Heath held up a finger. “I like the way you think.”

But instead of going to the kitchen, he stepped forward and smiled at Freya.

“Heath,” I growled just as Freya moaned his name.

“One quick orgasm from your favorite packmate?” Heath teased, running his hands down Freya’s body while she bounced on my dick.

Then his mouth went to her breast while he touched her clit. His hand came perilously close to my dick as she bounced up and down. But the three of us had gotten used to it. Our primary concern was taking care of Freya, not worrying about whose body parts touched whose. The few physical boundaries we shifters concerned ourselves with had relaxed significantly over the last several days.

“That’s it,” Heath coaxed. “Come for me, sweetness.”

And Freya did, her back arching, forcing her nipple into Heath’s mouth again. I hung on for dear life, doing everything I could not to come as her inner walls clamped down on me.

When Freya’s climax ended, Heath gave me a saucy wink. Only then did I realize how hard I was panting.

“Fucker,” I growled at him as he disappeared from the room.

“Always.” His laugh echoed down the hall.

Freya slumped onto my chest, once again putting her tantalizing shoulder close to my mouth again. I maintained iron control over my wolf this time, not giving him an inch of freedom.

“Did you like that, princess?” I whispered into her hair.

Her hips gently rocked against mine as we both took a bit of a breather.

“More,” she whined.

“Anything for you,” I whispered. “Anytime you want it.”

Heath padded into the room, and embarrassed heat flooded my body. Had he overheard my whispered promise to Freya? I wasn't ready to admit how far I'd fallen for her. Maybe because my wolf was being so difficult to contain.

“Both,” Freya demanded when she noticed Heath's presence.

“Not until you eat a little,” I growled.

“Both,” she growled in return.

“Don't give her any more cock until she drinks some,” I told Heath.

She growled, but Heath held the straw to Freya's lips as she sat back up to ride me some more.

“Drink,” I commanded with my alpha-bark. As usual, it had no true effect on her.

She stilled, glaring at me for a moment before taking a sip. Heath followed her lips as she bounced up and down on my cock. But she drank most of the glass before sweat broke out on her forehead and her pupils dilated again.

“Need to come,” she whined.

“Of course you do, little wolf.” Heath's jeans dropped into a pile beside the bed.

My pulse quickened as his weight made the bed dip.

“Gage,” she whisper-moaned. “Heath. Flint. Rowan.”

“Let's test the pack alpha's staying power,” Heath whispered in her ear from behind her, a playful look in his eyes as his gaze met mine.

With his body mostly hidden behind hers, he palmed one breast while circling her clit with his other hand. His lips kissed that spot on her neck, the spot I'd almost bitten earlier. And somehow... that made me even harder inside of her.

“Fuck yes,” she screamed as her orgasm ripped through her.

Heath's eyes remained locked on me, challenging me not to come. My fists balled the blankets on either side of me as Freya's body clenched on mine, trying to milk me.

"Please," Freya cried desperately, though her body still pulsed around me. "Both."

"Then show me that ass," Heath growled, pushing her down onto my chest.

Outside, Flint's wolf howled at the moon, but Freya had both of us spellbound. She canted her hips up, and Heath prepped her as quickly as he could, using her own fluids that coated us both.

"Gage got you so wet, didn't he, baby?" Heath said from behind her.

Inside of me, my wolf preened at the indirect praise. He knew what came next, and he craved it.

Heath lined himself up with Freya's rear entrance, and we all moaned when he pushed himself inside. This was only the second time I'd had her this way with Heath, and it threatened my control all over again. I nearly shot my load inside of her as I felt Heath's cock nestle in her alongside mine.

It nearly did me in, feeling his cock sliding against mine just on the other side of that thin membrane of hers. I clenched my teeth as Heath fully seated himself inside of her.

I would never admit it to him, but the feeling of our cocks rubbing together as he sawed in and out of her? It turned me on in a way I'd never felt before.

"I... won't last," I gasped.

With Freya on top of me and Heath above her, I was in the strange position of surrendering control for once. And my wolf seemed to love it just as much as I did.

"Where is Flint?" Freya whined, and for a moment, a hint of disappointment hit me through the pack bond before Heath shut himself off from me again.

I reached up and pinched Freya's nipples, trying to bring her focus back to us. "I sent him away on watch."

She could take her frustration out on me if she wanted to. But she just groaned as Heath and I synchronized our movements.

“Come,” Freya begged, and Heath nodded behind her.

His eyes met mine as he thrust deep, forcing her deeper onto me. That was the moment Freya and I both lost control. I kept my eyes locked on Heath’s, knowing that his presence could keep my wolf contained, preventing me from trying to bite her again.

The thought of biting her... My entire body shook as the orgasm hit me hard.

Heath’s lips quirked up in a satisfied smile as he drove us both over the edge. Filling her with my seed sated me, and Freya let out a long, keening moan. As soon as her climax ended, Freya’s body went limp on mine.

Heath helped me disentangle myself from her, and we both gazed down in contentment as Freya slept for the first time in over a day.

“Finally,” I grumbled.

Heath laughed, and I noticed he was still hard.

“Don’t worry, she’ll be awake and demanding my cock again soon enough,” Heath said. “In the meantime, I’ll get washed up.”

He disappeared into the bathroom, and I finished Freya’s smoothie in the doorway. With Flint on watch and Freya asleep, I probably should’ve been trying to get some shut-eye myself. But my curiosity got the better of me.

The shower spray kicked on, and I closed the bathroom door behind me so Freya wouldn’t hear what I was about to ask. With Heath on the other side of the shower curtain, I kept my voice low.

“Was the other woman you helped through her heat this insatiable?”

Heath growled, as though annoyed at me for asking. But he answered, “Not even close. I was the only one with her, yet

I had no problems getting her to bathe and eat. Freya is... in a league of her own.”

“I thought maybe it was because we’re not her mates, but that other woman wasn’t your mate either, so there goes that theory.”

“Could you stop calling her ‘the other woman’? It sounds like I’m a cheating asshole.”

“Flint thinks it’s because we’re missing one — Rowan.”

“Of course he does,” Heath grumbled.

I could see the silhouette of him through the curtain as he soaped up his still-hard cock. And for some reason, that made my previously limp dick start to thicken.

I turned my back on him and stared at the towels instead. “Well, what else could it be?”

“Maybe it’s because it’s her first-ever heat... and it’s the Harvest Moon tonight... and her wolf is bottled up, along with her magic? Or all of the above? Who can say?”

“Good point.”

The water shut off, and I left the room as Heath got out and toweled off. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw Freya still sleeping on the bed. I’d lost track of time, but I imagined Flint’s turn at watch had nearly concluded. No chance for me to get any sleep.

Sure enough, I heard the door downstairs open and close. Unfortunately, it was enough to wake Freya. As though she had a sixth sense for hard cocks, her eyes instantly fell on Heath’s member.

He grinned, stroking himself in front of her as she wet her lips.

“I hope you’re done talking, because I’ve got an important job to do,” Heath gave himself another stroke before winking at me.

Stupidly, I realized I’d been staring at the mesmerizing motion of his hand on himself. I tore my gaze away.

“Of course. Get to work.”

Heath chuckled as I exited the room. Behind me, the headboard of the bed started rhythmically hitting the wall.

“Show-off,” I muttered.

By the time I reached the front door, Flint had already shed his sling bag. Completely nude, he nodded to me on his way up to the bedroom.

The full moon awaited me, but knowing the two of them got to be with her made it hard for me to leave the safehouse. But no way would I leave my pack vulnerable in unfamiliar territory.

Normally, Flint would’ve waited until I came outside to relieve him before coming in. But he’d howled, and apparently no one had showed up to challenge him. I’d smelled no blood on him, so he must have decided the area was clear of other wolves. It didn’t matter; I would do a perimeter check, anyway. And if I came upon a rogue alpha who’d scented Freya’s heat...

At the thought of a fight, my wolf stirred. He loved a good fight, especially when it came to protecting the pack and proving himself a capable pack alpha.

Protect mates, he growled as I shifted.

I startled, confused at why he would say mates instead of mate. It was impossible to mishear his internal words.

But now that I’d finally given him control, he broke into an all-out run, taking over from me and pushing my human thoughts aside. His euphoria at being under the full moon became mine, and our soul entwined into one. I raced up a sloped rock and caught sight of the round Full Harvest Moon hanging in the pre-dawn sky.

A howl tore from my throat, and in that moment, I knew true elation. I was a powerful alpha wolf shifter. I’d been chosen to see Freya through her heat. And I was the pack alpha of the Howling Echo.

No one dared challenge me.

Chapter 21

Flint

Freya crawled across the bed to me, moaning with pure need. Gage and I were already spent from satisfying her just a few minutes earlier, but she was ravenous. Unfortunately, since it was nighttime and we weren't in safe territory, Heath was on watch, prowling the perimeter.

“Should I get Heath for you, moonbeam?” I croaked.

She'd drained me dry repeatedly for the past five days, and even with all three of us to please her, she'd wanted more. That three alphas were no match for her proved she wasn't meant to have three mates, but four — we needed Rowan.

She'd never be satisfied without him. We rarely got her to eat or sleep. In the few calm moments when she drifted off, she often moaned his name.

“Fuck me,” she begged.

Gage caught her around the waist before she could reach me, then threw her down on her back. He wasn't hard at all, but he buried his face between her thighs, making her scream and beg and cry for more. Then he filled her with his fingers until her body shuddered with release... again and again. I watched him make her come five times back to back as I played with her nipples and wished I could rise to the occasion.

But fingers alone weren't enough for her. Her wolf spirit was strong and insatiable.

“I'll switch with Heath,” Gage growled before licking his fingers clean. “Stay with her.”

I heard him rush down the stairs and burst through the front door. Since we'd pulled the drapes tightly over the window for Freya's benefit, I couldn't see his wolf charge across the clearing to the forest, but my wolf spirit imagined it for me.

It had been a relief to take my turn at watch yesterday, the night of the Harvest Moon. I'd never spent so much time indoors on a full moon night, but for Freya, it was worth it. My wolf spirit had been difficult to please — he wanted to run with his mate, not leave her behind during her heat.

Freya's needy moan brought me back to the present, and I took over where Gage had left off. Her voice was rough as she moaned, and I brought her to orgasm twice more before trying to convince her to sip some juice.

“Drink,” I ordered with my alpha command, not that it did any good with her.

Maybe it was because her wolf had yet to appear, or maybe it was her half-witch blood, but whatever the reason, none of us could use our alpha-barks to compel her to take care of her body. And she was weakening as a result. It made my wolf restless, worried for his mate.

But tonight was night five, so surely her heat would abate soon enough. Then we could all get some much-needed rest. I felt weary down to the marrow of my bones.

I opened my eyes, startling awake, realizing I'd fallen asleep in the bed beside Freya. Her lips circled my flaccid member, and it gave a valiant twitch as my body rallied to answer our mate's needs.

When Heath showed up in the doorway, he grinned. “Can't get it up?”

I growled. “For the fifty-fourth time today? No, I cannot.”

Sensing fresh meat, Freya got to her hands and knees, then backed up toward Heath, putting herself on display.

“Fuck me, alpha.”

Heath laughed and peeled off his clothes. “Are we sure her inner wolf isn’t an alpha, too? She’s so demanding.”

Much like Gage had done earlier, he grabbed her and tossed her on the bed on her back. He pinched her nipples, making her moan, and his hard dick teased her entrance.

“Line me up, would you?” Heath asked.

I hesitated, but of course, it wasn’t the first time we’d touched each other’s bodies during these five days. I supposed this would just be returning the favor. Not long after Freya had lost herself to the heat, Heath had helped line me up when I’d had my hands full of Freya.

When I’d blinked in surprise, he’d shrugged and said, “If all three of us are going to do this to her, things are going to touch.”

Which was reasonable.

Less reasonable were his wink and flirtatious words. “It doesn’t have to be sexual... unless you want it to.” Which sounded like a come on, but the mischievous glint of amusement through the pack bond told me he was trying to rile me up. His words had stuck, though.

After all, we’d both been inside Freya more times than I could actually keep track of by now. Heath’s dick had stroked mine from inside of her. And I’d gotten off on it every damn time.

So, I helped out my packmate by grabbing his dick and holding it steady so he could slide into her wet and greedy pussy while his hands were otherwise occupied. Clearly no boundaries had been crossed or blurred, so I shrugged and focused back on Freya.

“Thanks,” he grunted, as though I’d done nothing more than pass him the salt at dinner.

I took over playing with her nipples as Heath grabbed her hips and pounded into her, trying to draw this out as long as he could until I could recover.

“You’re going to be so sore, moonbeam,” I whispered to her. “So deliciously sore.”

“Yes,” she moaned. “Please, Flint, I need you. Fliiiiiint,” she whined as Heath slowed and took his time. “Please!”

Hearing her moan my name with someone else inside her revived my well-used member, and it sprang to life.

“Ready for another round?” Heath grinned over at me. “She can never get enough of you.”

His smile slipped, and even though I couldn’t sense his emotions through the pack bond like Gage could, I knew how much it hurt him to see Freya constantly beg for me every single day. She’d begged for him and Gage, too, of course. And even Rowan, usually in her sleep. But I had a feeling Heath and Freya still had a lot to work out after the heat.

“Front or back?” I asked him.

Freya chuckled, but I didn’t know why. Until now, her heat had given her a single-minded focus on nothing but sex and more sex.

“I’ll keep her on me,” Heath said, scooping her up and forcing her gyrating hips to still against his.

Then he rolled over onto his back, still buried to the hilt inside of her. Her round ass was in the air, waiting for me. Seeing Heath stuffing her dripping pussy with his cock made me go even harder. She never felt so tight as she did when we both filled her up at the same time.

“Flint,” she growled. “Hurry up.”

I grabbed the lube, and even though this was the second time we’d done this configuration today, my body was still happy to oblige. As I prepped her, she growled again.

“I’m ready,” she moaned as I scissored my fingers in her tight rear entrance.

“He’ll decide when you get his cock,” Heath growled, nipping at her ear.

“I think she’s coming back to us,” I said, trying not to sound too relieved.

She was becoming more lucid with her demands, instead of mostly begging for ‘more’ and ‘both’ and ‘all of you’ — her three most common phrases over the past five days.

“Yes, she is,” Heath said, staring up into her face, his expression difficult to read.

I carefully lined myself up with her rear entrance and then slid in, inch by inch.

Predictably, Freya chanted, “More, more, more,” the whole time until I found my hips tight against her round little ass.

“Ready?” I asked Heath.

“Always,” he said with a grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

He and Freya harmonized their moans as I began sliding in and out of her. Heath went still for a few moments before he matched my rhythm inside of her.

“You both feel so good,” he groaned, his head falling back and his eyes closing.

I felt his length twitch inside of her, and I stilled. Freya wasn’t even close to coming.

“Not yet,” I growled in warning.

Heath’s eyes flashed open. Normally, he was the more dominant wolf, but right now, he was hanging on by a thread. Panting, he gazed up at Freya’s face, his eyes softening.

“You’re right,” he whispered. “I want this one to last.”

I took up a gentle grind, and Heath watched Freya’s face as I did so. His expression was so full of awe and... worship, that it hurt my heart. I suddenly realized why he wanted this one to last... because he knew her heat was almost over, and he feared everything was about to change.

So together, we gently rocked inside of Freya, and she sighed in contentment. It was the first time during her heat where she took two of us at once without begging for a third to

fill her up. That was part of why the three of us were so exhausted — she'd rarely been content with just one of us pleasuring her at a time.

Honestly, we'd barely kept up with her, and I wasn't sure that Rowan would have helped that much. Maybe if we had twice as many wolves, we might make it to the end without feeling so drained. I was thoroughly satisfied, yes, but also tired and sore down to my bones.

Together, we gasped and moaned and enjoyed every second. Heath and I brought Freya to orgasm over and over on our cocks, while fighting our way through without losing control ourselves. We'd all become the masters of edging ourselves during the past five days.

But Heath was right — everything really was about to change. Once her heat was over, I would be free to court Freya properly, as I'd wanted to do all along. And if the other boneheads would listen, I sensed she would end up with not just three mates, but four.

“Come for me,” she begged. “Come with me.”

And then Freya's walls clenched around both of us again. I slipped a hand between her and Heath, circling her clit and making her next orgasm even more powerful. She screamed and bit down on Heath's shoulder.

His eyes widened in shock. But she was only human. Even if she'd wanted to give him a mate mark, she couldn't, not without her wolf. Still, it was enough to drive Heath over the edge, knowing that she wanted him badly enough to bite him.

Feeling his dick pulsing inside of her, just on the other side of that thin membrane, sent me over the edge with them both. I roared as I came deep within her, but her body continued to milk me, as though greedy for everything I offered.

She twisted to look over her shoulder at me and grinned when she saw my expression. Despite my orgasm-fogged brain, I noted how her pupils were no longer blown wide and black.

The three of us collapsed together on the abused bed. Her skin was cooler to the touch now, and as I ran a hand over her hip and kissed the back of her shoulder, my wolf spirit and I both felt content at last. Just as I had, he sensed that her heat had worn off.

“The last time Flint asked me ‘front or back,’ he was inviting me back to camp to meet you and Gage,” Freya whispered into Heath’s chest hair, her head on his muscular pecs.

I chuckled, realizing now she’d been lucid much earlier than I thought.

“Welcome back,” I whispered into her hair as I continued running my hand up and down her naked skin.

“It’s good to be back,” she whispered. “Why does my throat hurt so much?”

“Probably from screaming that you wanted every hole filled,” Heath teased.

Freya clicked her tongue. “Did not.”

Heath choked on a laugh. “Every day and night.”

She rolled over to look at me, as if expecting me to contradict him.

I chuckled and nuzzled into her neck before whispering, “You were insatiable, moonbeam.”

“Good thing you accepted all three of us,” Heath said.

When we looked over at him, he was wearing a smirk, but the mirth didn’t quite reach his eyes. He was just waiting for her to reject him. I could see it in the tension in his body and the way he gave Freya space on the bed, as if suddenly scared to touch her.

He’d been in his element during her heat, always rolling with what she wanted, only pausing to get her food or to pick her up and drag her into the bath. But now he was a man out of his element, wondering if he’d get invited to breakfast or be forced on a walk of shame.

My wolf spirit knew that the two of them just needed time to lick their wounds. Once all our wolves finally got acquainted, her wolf spirit would choose all four of us as her mates. With how many times she'd called out in her sleep for a man she'd never even met, I felt sure of it.

But telling Heath that wouldn't reassure him, and Freya might not be ready to hear it either.

So I disentangled myself from my packmates and said, "I'll get some towels for you both."

"That was a fast heat, right?" Freya asked as I left the room, hoping the two of them might talk through their differences.

"Sure." Heath's laugh echoed down the hall after me. "If you can call five days of threesomes 'fast.' I'm sure it went by in a flash for you."

"Uh huh. And I bet my throat is actually sore from you three making me deep throat you!"

"No, it's from how many times you screamed for more cocks."

I chuckled at their fake argument as I turned on the bathroom light. He wasn't wrong.

I smirked to myself. And neither was she.

Chapter 22

Freya

With Flint gone, I rolled over and looked at Heath on the other side of the bed. He was close enough that I could've touched him if I wanted to. But we were both naked and exhausted, and I didn't want him to mistake my intentions. Every muscle felt sore, but I ached in a good way.

Except my stomach, which felt like it was in the process of consuming my other organs. I hadn't been this hungry in a while. Not since I'd been starved and beaten in the Ironwood pack.

I shook my head, choosing to think about something else. Even if that something else was just as nerve-wracking. My emotions were all over the place thanks to the stress of the heat, leaving me feeling weak and vulnerable.

"Is it normal for me not to remember everything?" I asked, still feeling a bit foggy. "I mean... I remember some, but..."

What I did remember left me feeling even more stressed. I'd begged for their cocks over and over. I felt raw emotionally.

"Perfectly normal, but if you'd like, I can tell you some of the things we did."

Trying to cover up my anxiety, I smirked, sitting up in the bed. "What was your favorite part?"

He scoffed. "Of the past five days? I'm not even sure I remember all of it, sleep deprived as I am."

I took a pillow and smacked him with it. His eyes twinkled with playfulness.

“But I can tell you my favorite part from the past hour or so. I liked it when you crawled on your hands and knees and begged for us.”

I knew he meant it to be sexy, but I couldn't help flinching. Maybe it was because I was so low on food and sleep, but his flirty words dredged up the memory of a different time I'd crawled on my hands and knees in front of men.

Back in the Ironwood pack, Fisher or maybe Zane had kicked my knees out from under me as they beat me. And when I was curled up on the ground, trying to minimize the damage, Luka, the pack alpha's son, had piled humiliation on top of pain, sneering, *Let her crawl.*

Aching and enraged, I'd choked down my tears and painfully obeyed his command, slowly pulling myself up on my hands and knees in spite of the pain to crawl to the pack gathering as innumerable wolves watched and said nothing.

Crawling is the closest you'll ever get to shifting, half-breed.

In the darkened room, that night rose clearly to mind, filling my quiet surroundings with the sounds of the crowd gathering for Luka and Nira's betrothal announcement.

Flashing forward, I relived the rest of that night, I recalled the moon singling me out as Luka's fated mate during the ceremony, the pack alpha ordering Luka to kill me, Luka banishing me instead, and a crowd of hostile wolves surrounding me and manhandling me out of the territory.

Left alone in the wildlands in the dark, I fought for my life. As I felt hands seize me again, I flailed, striking back at my attackers.

My fists lashed out and found hard flesh beneath them. I screamed a battle cry and fought like my life depended on it — because it did. No one would care if the half-breed died. No one would look out for me but me.

And so I fought like a beast unleashed, screaming, crying, not caring what I looked like, only focused on survival. Strong arms encircled me, but I ducked beneath them, coming up

blindly beside my enemy. I tried to attack while I had the advantage, but the ground dropped out from under me.

I fell off the flat surface and onto the floor, but I righted myself instantly, unwilling to let them take advantage of the weak moment. I growled, and they laughed, taunting me for failing to shift, year after year.

“Stay away from me,” I growled low in my throat, but a hand grabbed my arm.

I kicked, lashing out with a scream, not caring if everyone heard or not. They wouldn’t help me, anyway. No one would. Two hard bodies pressed in against me, holding me against my will.

I pulled my arms tight against my body and dropped to the ground, kicking at their legs in my scramble to break free.

“We’re only making it worse,” a masculine voice said.

That voice gave me pause. It was a voice that had never hurt me. A voice that had comforted me and cared for me. Not an enemy. Not a bully.

Not a memory.

I wasn’t facing down the Ironwood pack any more. And I wouldn’t have to face them alone any more. I was part of the Howling Echo now.

I blinked, coming back to awareness of my surroundings. The dimness wasn’t because I was fighting in the dark, but because I was in a small, dark bedroom. Crouched on the floor besides the window, backed against a wall so no one could attack from behind.

I gasped and stood up, throwing back the curtains. Nothing but forest outside. A nearly full moon hung in the sky, and inside me, my wolf sat back and howled.

“I’m free,” I whispered to myself. “Those are just memories.”

“You are free, Freya,” Heath said from behind me. “Whatever you were remembering, it’s over now.”

His voice was calm and soothing, different than I'd ever heard it before.

"It's over," I whispered to myself, wishing that were true.

Those memories would always haunt me. And it was clear now that the past could affect me more than I'd expected, especially when my defenses were down.

I turned to find Flint and Heath standing there, their eyes wide with worry. Flint silently held his hands out to me, palms up.

Inside of me, my wolf whined, and I rushed to my mate, letting his arms wrap around me without fear or reservation this time. And somehow, the feeling of his strength holding me up made me feel safe enough to let the walls down. Tears streamed down my face, and I let myself sob into his chest.

"I—was—remem—remembering..." The sobs wracking my body made it hard to get the words out.

"I know. It's okay, Freya," Flint whispered into my hair. "You'll probably feel better when we get some food in you."

When he said 'we,' I remembered Flint hadn't been alone. I stilled, then twisted in Flint's arms to see Heath standing in the light of the window, his naked chest and abs covered in slashes of red. A line of blood trailed down from one of them, and I gasped.

"Did I...?"

"It wasn't your fault, moonbeam," Flint whispered into my hair. "You didn't recognize us. You thought we were trying to hurt you."

Heath took my hand, bringing it up to his lips. His intense caramel gaze bored into me, and he made no move to address the wounds I'd inflicted.

"I would bleed for you again, little wolf. Whatever you need."

I shook my head as guilt crashed into me. "I didn't—I—"

Heath swiped a tear from my eye and brought it to his lips. “I made you cry. I deserved every blow you struck. I’m sorry for ever hurting you.”

Somehow, with the depth of his words, I knew he wasn’t really talking about just now. Of course, he hadn’t meant to trigger me, but he’d admitted that he meant to hurt me the first and only time we’d had sex alone together.

“Heath...” I sighed.

“Are you okay, moonbeam?” Flint asked me. “I left the two of you alone because I hoped you’d talk. But if you want me to stay... I will.”

I smiled up at Flint, the only consistent one of them all. He’d protected me from the beginning, and I knew he always would.

“I think I’m okay now,” I said. “And thank you for coming to rescue me, even if it was my own memories I needed rescuing from.”

Flint bent down to softly kiss me, his lips doing little more than meeting mine before he pulled back. “Always.” Then a stern look came over him. “I’ll bring you up some food, and I expect you to actually eat it this time.”

I chuckled, sensing it had been a difficult five days for them. If the dark circles under their eyes were anything to go by, neither of them had gotten much sleep.

“And now that it’s dawn, Gage will be back. He’ll want to see for himself that you’re okay.”

I nodded, but my stomach clenched. Good thing the pack alpha hadn’t been here to see me acting so weak. Now that the heat was over, where did I stand with the pack?

Before I could figure out how to broach the topic with Flint, he left me behind. At the doorway, he turned back and smiled gently at me. Then he moved silently toward the stairs.

I turned back to face something far scarier than memories. It was time to move forward from the past and figure out things with Heath.

The enigmatic man gave me a slow, shy smile. “I hope it’s not too triggering to suggest we bathe?”

Chapter 23

Heath

I hadn't meant to trigger Freya. I hadn't even realized that was what it was until I'd gently grasped her shoulder to turn her to face me and she'd blindly lashed out. Once I understood, though, I knew I was the right man to be there for her. Out of all of us, I deserved these wounds.

Her suffering drove my wolf insane.

Protect, he demanded, but there was nothing to protect her from.

Watching her relive her trauma only made me feel more guilty for what I'd done. She'd been through so much already. Then I'd been careless with her, treating her like she meant nothing to me. Just like her old pack had done to her.

Despite everything she'd been through, she'd never once broken. Freya was stronger than that. Maybe stronger than all of us. She struggled valiantly against her past, fighting back, not whimpering and cowering.

And, based on the hits she'd gotten on me, I was sure the wolves who'd attacked her hadn't always gotten away injury-free. She lacked confidence in her own strength and abilities, but it was clear to me that she was more than capable of holding her own. Maybe not against alphas or multiple attackers, but the girl packed a mean punch. And a tenacious ferocity that only came from fighting to survive.

Protecting her from her past was impossible, so instead, I promised myself I would be there to protect her from now on. And help her learn to protect herself — she wasn't the kind of

wolf who wanted someone to take her fights for her. She just wanted, and needed, someone to fight beside her.

She was still a little shaky from reliving harsh memories, so I followed Freya into the bathroom, both of us still naked. She flipped on the light, then gasped and brought her hands to my face. I glanced at the mirror to see a bruise under my eye where she'd punched me.

"Heath, I'm so sorry—"

I took her hands in mine, pulling them away from my face. "Never apologize for defending yourself."

"It wasn't you. I mean, I was having flashbacks—"

"You were still being attacked, Freya. Always fight back, little wolf."

"I'm still sorry for hurting you," she frowned.

"I know. But... I kind of deserved it." My smile dropped. "I shouldn't have treated you the way I did at the restaurant. Or before that. I'm the one who's sorry. I was an idiot, Freya."

"You are." She grabbed some tissues and began wiping blood off my chest and abs.

I smiled down at my little warrior wolf, the woman I'd taught how to hold a rifle. She never surrendered, didn't pull her punches, and wasn't afraid of calling me on my shit.

"You deserve so much better than me," I told her as she dabbed at my wounds. "You're the most amazing woman I've met."

Freya shook her head, sending her white hair falling around her shoulders. "I'm broken, Heath. What just happened proved that. I'm broken and scarred and—"

I grabbed her hands, stopping her movements. Her eyes rose to meet mine.

"You're beautiful," I corrected her, tracing a scar on her arm. "Scars and all."

Though I had a few visible scars of my own, hers were more extensive for the simple fact that she couldn't heal like

we could.

“Besides, we’ve all got our own invisible scars, Freya. You’re not the only one.”

She pulled her hands back so she could keep wiping away my blood again and again. It was going to keep coming back until I shifted. Then those minor scratches would disappear.

“Don’t worry about me. Once we’re done here, I’ll shift. What matters to me most right now is that you’re okay.”

Claim, my wolf insisted. Need mate bond.

Maybe he was right. Gage could sense her through the pack bond, but Freya would be even safer with a mate bond... from Flint, of course. Then she’d have two overprotective alphas ready to pounce the moment they sensed she was in danger.

She pressed her lips together, and I spotted tears forming in her eyes. Hooking a finger under her chin, I forced her eyes up to me. Why was my brave little wolf on the verge of tears again?

“Talk to me, Freya. I’m not exactly good at these things, but... I want to listen.”

Talking about feelings with someone I cared about romantically wasn’t my strong suit. It was something I’d actively avoided with my fuck buddies. Emotional intimacy led to attachment, and I hadn’t been willing to risk something serious when my father might arrange my marriage with some fae royal or powerful witch coven at any time.

But for Freya, I was willing to fight. And it would likely come down to a fight — he wouldn’t easily give up his plans for me, and the Howling Echo would need to be prepared. But I’d come close enough to ruining this myself, and I refused to let him ruin it for me by trying to marry me off to some far-off allies. I couldn’t just let her go like I’d done with so many before.

When the silence between us lengthened, I thought Freya might not confide in me, but then she straightened, her expression somber.

“I always wanted to leave Ironwood, but they’re still after me. And the deal I made with you guys... My heat’s over, Heath. What happens now?”

I couldn’t help it. I crushed her to me, squeezing her, surrounding her with my body and arms as though I could keep her safe through force of will alone.

“You’re safe with the Howling Echo,” I promised. “You’re safe with me. You’re one of us now.”

Freya pushed me away. She glared and held her arms wide until I noticed how my blood covered her face, breasts, and stomach. She looked like a primal goddess, and I wanted to kneel at her feet and worship her until she cried my name to the heavens.

“One day, I’ll see you covered in your enemies’ blood,” I promised her. “Everyone who hurt you... We’ll make Ironwood pay.”

My savage words came out on a growl. Eyes wide, Freya held up her hands and shook her head. “Whoa, down boy.”

Her eyes dipped lower, and I realized that somehow, despite five days of her draining me dry the moment I could get it up, the idea of killing her enemies had gotten me hard again. Diverted from thoughts of claiming her for the first time in days, my wolf was now pushing for violence — he wanted to howl in victory for all to hear, showing her we were a worthy mate.

Kill her enemies. Everyone who hurt her. And bring her their corpses.

Definitely. I sent my agreement back to him, ignoring that my wolf sounded like a bit of an unhinged psychopath at the moment. Freya likely wouldn’t be thrilled with a pile of Ironwood corpses, but maybe her wolf would like that.

With my inner wolf settled and focused on something other than claiming her, I grinned. “Like I said... I would bleed for you, Freya. But I’d rather bleed *them* instead.”

She laughed. “I admire your ambitions, but let’s start with a shower.”

She flipped on the water, but I grabbed her wrist, pulling her back toward me. I pushed her hair behind her ear and trailed my thumb along her chin.

“Are we okay, Freya?”

Her expression softened into an almost-smile, then her eyes hardened. “If you can stop being an asshole for more than five minutes.”

I laughed. “Challenge accepted.” Then I swiped my thumb across her lower lip. “But only for you.”

She smirked and threw her hands up. “Alphas!”

Then she stepped into the shower. I crowded in after her, glad she was willing and able to care for herself again. Despite that, I poured shampoo in my hands and began lathering it through Freya’s hair. She groaned in pleasure, which didn’t help my boner situation.

“You don’t have to bathe me anymore, you know,” she said as I carefully guarded her eyes when I rinsed the shampoo from her hair.

I smirked. “Now you tell me.”

It was nice, though, taking care of her without fighting to keep her in the bathtub in her insatiable quest for more cock. Her heat had been so different, not at all like the heat I’d spent with the other wolf. Freya had been more demanding, and her heat had ended more abruptly than I remembered with the widowed wolf.

I wasn’t sure what to make of it, so I wasn’t going to bring it up. We had enough to wonder about with Freya’s dreams of Rowan, who she’d never met. I had to admit, though, the details she’d described from her dream seemed dead right. And she’d called his name during the heat. It was just so extraordinary — and so was she.

“Heath...” Freya pulled my wandering thoughts back to the bathroom. “I need you to be honest with me.”

“Of course, little wolf.”

“Did Gage bite me as part of the deal? Like, just to protect me? Am I just a temporary packmate or...”

“Freya, no,” I growled, my hands coming down on her shoulders. “Gage doesn’t give temporary pack status to anyone — not pack followers, contractors, or anyone else who helps us with jobs. He bit you so that you would be one of us. You’re here to stay. You’re a true Howling Echo wolf now.”

She shook her head. “I’m not a wolf, though.” She squared her shoulders, raising her eyes to mine. “If Gage cast me out, would you go with me?” Her snow-blue eyes pierced my soul. “Do you care about me, now that the heat is over? Or am I still just...” She waved a hand at my dick. “Your plaything.”

“Freya...”

I wanted to take her in my arms and give her proof that I cared about her. But the way that my mind and body wanted to worship her wouldn’t prove anything to her. The deal had convinced her we just wanted her body, not her.

Her jaw tightened, and I cursed at myself for hesitating and being bad at relationships. “Just give me a second to get my thoughts together.”

What could I say to reassure her? Freya knocked me off-kilter, and after five days of almost no sleep, my thoughts felt sluggish. What would Flint say to her in this situation?

“I’m sorry for making you feel like that’s all you are to me. But the truth is, yes, I care about you. And I want to see where things go with us. I’m not fighting it now. But, even if you decide you don’t want me, you’ll still be my packmate, and that means more than you know. When your wolf arrives, you’ll see. You’ll be able to hear all of us when we run together... your wolf will know her place is with us.”

“But Gage—”

“I’ll fight Gage myself if he says any different. But Freya, I think he wants you in the pack as much as any of us. I’ve known Gage a long time, and... I’ve never seen him look at someone the way he looks at you.”

It twisted my heart to admit it, but it was true. Gage would never reciprocate my feelings for him. I'd come to terms with that long ago, and I kept them tightly under wraps. More than once, I'd seen him publicly reject male wolves who came onto him, and he could be brutal about it if he felt pushed too hard. I wasn't foolish enough to think I'd get a different result if I made the same mistake.

But I wanted both Freya and Gage to be happy, and since they brought happiness to each other, I would do whatever it took to keep them together.

"Look, I know you have trust issues, and I get it. After what I saw in there—" I jerked a thumb over my shoulder back toward the bedroom, "I really understand. You've never had a pack you could depend on. So let us prove it to you, little by little, day by day. Let us earn your trust."

As the water cascaded over both of us, I pulled her slender fingers to my lips. On each of her small knuckles, I planted a soft kiss.

"Let me earn back your trust, little wolf. Yes, the deal is over, but that means you set the rules for where things go from here. I promise you, whatever happens, I go where you go."

Cursing myself, I knew that's what I should have said the moment she asked. The moment was just so tense, I acted by reflex to diffuse the tension.

"But just so you know... you'll be a lot harder to follow without the scent of your heat. So don't leave without me."

A smile quirked at Freya's lips, but I could see in her eyes that she didn't fully believe me; she didn't completely trust my words. So, I would have to earn back her trust through my actions instead. Somehow.

When Flint suddenly burst into the room, her face lit up with such undiluted joy, it trapped the air in my lungs. I wish she would look that way at me... I wished I'd never messed things up.

"Are you almost done?" Flint asked. "Because this breakfast scramble is to die for."

Freya poked her head out of the shower and her nostrils flared as she caught the scent. The bowl in Flint's hands contained chunks of sausage, scrambled eggs, beans, peppers, and cheese. He raised a gooey bite on a spoon, and strands of cheese snapped off.

Freya obediently opened her mouth like a little bird, and her eyes rolled back the moment Flint delivered the food to her mouth. She moaned, torturing me again. Her heat was over, but my desire for her hadn't abated even a little.

But I sensed I still needed to prove myself to her. She still didn't trust me, which meant I didn't know where I stood with her. This morning might have been our last time together.

Flint intended to court her, and he was doing a good job already. For wolf shifters, providing food for one's mate signified true commitment. I needed to prove myself to her, and I wouldn't be able to do that in a day. If I could do it at all.

I backed off, dipping into the spray of water to rinse myself off as though the water could protect me from the coming heartbreak. Flint helped Freya out of the shower and toweled her off, pausing every few seconds to feed her another bite.

Freya deserved to be pampered. And Flint was a natural at it in a way I'd never be.

My mood spiraled as I imagined years of watching Flint spoil Freya, of seeing his bite mark on her neck, of Freya choosing him alone for all her future heats...

"Do I have clothes somewhere?" Freya asked.

"Right outside the door, moonbeam," Flint said, but he hung back as she left the bathroom.

He turned to me, fixing me with a stern look.

"What?" I asked.

"You need to get out of your own way, bonehead."

I grumbled as I toweled off, not caring in the slightest that Flint and I were alone in the bathroom together. We were packmates, and we saw each other naked all the time.

Something I would have to get used to with Freya, once her wolf arrived.

“She needs all of us,” Flint growled. “Don’t fuck this up again.”

“Flint, you’ve already started courting her...”

“And you have, too.” He gestured to the shower.

I sighed, knowing he was right. When I’d washed her hair, that hadn’t been something packmates did for one another. It was something mates did. But Flint wasn’t pissed about that.

“Don’t count yourself out. Her wolf will choose us all.”

“I guess we’ll see,” I said.

We all hoped Hugo was right and that her wolf would arrive late. Because if he was wrong, Freya would be crushed.

No matter what happened, I wanted to be there for her. I would never stop protecting her... as her packmate. But Flint was right — I shouldn’t count myself out. Otherwise I might as well give up now. No one wanted to mate with a mopey, insecure mess. I just needed to be patient.

“She still doesn’t trust me,” I admitted.

“You have to earn it. Come on,” Flint opened the bathroom door, inviting me to join him and Freya.

No, not inviting. Insisting. He glared at me until I got moving.

“Be right there. I told Freya that I go where she goes,” I said, watching his expression.

His eyes softened, and he gave me a nod of approval. “I think you’re finally getting it. She wants you just as much as she wants me and Gage.”

Maybe so. It might be too late — I might have ruined things. But that was up to her to decide. All I could do was give her reasons to choose me.

Chapter 24

Freya

We stayed at the cabin for one more day while we all rested up, ate, and regained our strength. I hadn't known what to expect with my first heat, but the guys had done what they'd promised to... gotten me through it unscathed, with my sanity intact.

I'd heard horror stories of female wolf shifters trapped alone due to an avalanche or other circumstances going insane without a mate to help them through the heat. After all, wolf shifters weren't like real wolves... we had magic in our veins, and that magic sometimes came with consequences.

But now what? I'd safely survived my first heat, Gage and Heath were being absolute gentleman, but I felt uncertain about how things would go now that it was over. And it seemed like they were unsure as well. The ray of sunshine of the whole ordeal was, as usual, Flint. He treated me exactly as he had before the heat. Nothing had changed between the two of us.

Or had it?

Flint was courting me. I'd heard the other two talking about it. And though I found the concept a bit old-fashioned, I appreciated that he didn't rush right into asking me to be his mate. Not that I didn't already know my answer — Flint was perfect. He was everything I'd never allowed myself to hope for in a mate, and more.

I found my thoughts straying frequently to my mother, who had apparently mated with three men — one of whom was a witch or mage — and to the Snow Moon wolf who

seemed to have her own harem of men. I'd always been taught wolves only had one mate, so even with their examples, it was taking me awhile to believe it was okay, if unusual, to have relationships with each Howling Echo alpha.

“Grandmother Moon guide me,” I whispered as I helped pack our meager belongings into the borrowed vehicle.

We all kept going in and out of the small cabin, but while I was outside alone, a phone started ringing. Glancing around, I didn't see it anywhere, but I followed the sound. Ripping open the van's passenger door, I stuck my head inside and discovered the phone must be in here. When I opened the glove compartment, the ringing phone fell to the floor and went silent.

“Shit, shit, shit,” I growled, picking it up.

It felt strange to hold a phone in my hands. The Ironwood pack had never allowed low-ranking packmates to own them.

“What is it?” Gage asked.

I turned around with heat flooding my cheeks as though I'd been caught red-handed. I didn't think Gage cared, but he'd also never given me a phone, either...

Holding the phone up, I gave a weak smile. “It was ringing, but it stopped just now.” *When I dropped it...*

“No one should be calling that phone,” Gage murmured, plucking it from my hand.

I held my breath, still not entirely sure I wasn't in trouble. With the heat over, I didn't exactly know where I stood with Gage, but he was the pack alpha, so his word was law. I didn't want to do anything to piss him off and get me kicked out of the pack. Flint and Heath said they would follow me, but destroying their pack — our pack — was the last thing I wanted.

Gage's brows drew down as he scanned the phone. “Our informant says she has new information that our employers will want to hear. Says she'll meet us at the same spot tonight.”

Heath had come outside, and he crowded in behind Gage to read the message for himself. "I don't like it."

"Neither do I," Gage said. "I'm going to call her."

He held the phone up, and I heard it dialing on speakerphone. It rang and rang, but no one answered.

"She just called," I protested.

"Well, she's not answering now," Gage said.

"Maybe she can't," Heath suggested. "Others could be around her now. She doesn't want to get caught."

"Finish packing up," Gage ordered. "Then we'll see if we can make it there early."

Heath nodded. "We'll scope it out. Make sure it's not a trap."

Their caution reassured me, and before long, the four of us were packed into the vehicle once more. I blushed when I remembered how Flint had made me come multiple times on the backseat.

Heath groaned. "Not the time, little wolf."

"Sorry," I muttered.

I'd thought my scent would be less distracting once my heat ended, but it seemed I was wrong. They could all easily smell my arousal in the closed-in space. Something I decided to keep in mind.

Flint grinned and gave me a big smooch. "They're professionals. They can handle some blue balls on the way to a mission."

"I'd rather not, though," Gage growled.

I scooted away from Flint and tried to keep my thoughts reined in.

Soon, the landscape around us started to look familiar, and I knew we must be close to the clearing where we'd met Ingrid before. Heath pulled the vehicle alongside some rocks and turned off the engine.

Silence surrounded us on all sides. The four of us regarded each other for a minute.

Then Heath said, “No reward without risk, right? This could be a big payday for us.”

Gage grunted, then motioned to Flint and Heath on the left side of the vehicle. “You two go scout. See what you see, but don’t engage, even if you see Ingrid. Come back and report first.”

As soon as Flint and Heath were gone, I turned to Gage and said, “Something doesn’t seem right.”

“Agreed.”

He kept watch, his head swiveling on all sides, gun in hand.

I started to ask, “Should I—”

But both our heads whipped to the side when we sensed movement, and my inner wolf started growling. Ten wolves were prowling toward us, emerging from behind nearby rock outcroppings, along with one in human form. Gage cursed when she came close enough to see, stopping ten feet the front of the van on the driver’s side.

“Fucking Frost Fang,” Gage growled.

She wasn’t Nira — I’d seen her on Ironwood packlands the night Luka and I became fake fated mates — but I had a feeling Gage recognized whoever she was.

“You’re surrounded on all sides,” the older woman called.

Gage growled, his face contorting into an animalistic snarl, his eyes instantly golden. I’d never seen him lose control like that. Whoever this woman was, I had a feeling she and Gage must have serious history.

Her short hair had grayed long ago, but her athletic body told me she couldn’t be that old. Wolf shifters aged more slowly than humans, making our ages difficult to guess.

“Gonna make us come in there to get you?” she asked, her voice clear enough through the glass.

Without waiting for an answer, she took aim at the front driver's side tire and fired her gun. The vehicle jolted as the tire rapidly deflated. In rapid succession, she shot out the other two she could see.

"I should have had you hide," Gage growled, turning his golden glare on me.

As pack alpha, it was in Gage's blood to protect. But for the first time, I would be able to stand with my pack, and I didn't want to hide or be left behind.

"We'll face them together," I said, holding his gaze. "Come what may."

Gage frowned, then gave a sharp nod. "Letting them break in here after us will only get us injured in the process, which will make it harder to escape later. From the bond, it seems Heath and Flint remain free, but we're about to be captured. We have to let them think that they've won. Be ready when you see me shift, though. Got it?"

I nodded, and with that, Gage opened the door and raised his hands, letting his gun drop to the ground. I left the one he'd given me in the backseat and raised my hands.

"Karina," Gage growled.

She grinned. "The prodigal son returns. Can't say I've missed you, son."

That's when I realized that she must be one of his father's mates. One of the women who helped Nira orchestrate his brother's death. One of the reasons why he'd hated me so much when we first met.

"And you must be Freya."

Gage growled when Karina said my name, stepping in front of me as I slowly got out of the vehicle.

"Nira's going to be thrilled to see you both," Karina crowed as the wolves around her raised their muzzles and let out a unified howl.

The hairs stood on the back of my neck, and I hoped Flint and Heath would stay safe. They had to have heard that, and

they had to know we were in trouble. We just had to hope they didn't come rushing in and getting themselves caught, too.

The wolves remained shapeshifted while Karina patted down Gage and removed a few other weapons, tossing them carelessly on the forest floor. She searched me next and discarded my blade the same way.

"Follow me," she said.

Gage stayed by my side as the wolves surrounded us, escorting us behind Karina, who remained in human form. When we reached the place where we'd met Ingrid, we found her bound and gagged with her face and throat bloodied, along with her hands. From the blood that still trickled down her shirt, I wasn't sure she would last much longer without shifting.

Beside her stood an alpha I recognized. Nira's dark brown hair fell into warrior's braids behind her back. She carried herself with an alpha's confidence, and the scar on her shoulder showed she was no stranger to fighting for what she wanted.

"Nira," Gage spat, his eyes glowing gold for just a moment before he regained control.

"Gage," Nira smiled, but the expression didn't reach her eyes.

She turned to Ingrid and ripped off her gag. "Is this the girl?"

"I'm so sorry," Ingrid cried, and Nira viciously kicked her, knocking her to the ground.

"I asked you a question!"

Ingrid whimpered, and I rushed forward, but Karina grabbed my elbow and pulled me back as Gage growled.

"Yes," Ingrid whispered, staring at the ground.

"Good. You're a traitor to this pack. Kill her," Nira commanded.

Three wolves instantly leaped forward. Ingrid tried to shift, but they were already on her. She barely got her paws under her before they bowled her over. In an instant, they ripped out her throat.

I cried out in shock and horror as her blood sprayed the forest floor. Her wolf slumped to the ground, dead.

I fell to my knees in shock, tears filling my eyes. Ingrid had been my only link to my past. She didn't have to share what she knew of my family, but she did it anyway. Even in the few brief moments I'd known her, she'd shown me more compassion than any wolf in Ironwood ever had. And now she was gone.

"I've been thinking about taking you back to my future mate so he can watch you die," Nira mused. "But you're already annoying me."

A low rumble came from Gage's chest as she approached me.

"I suppose I'll just deliver your body to Luka instead."

Chapter 25

Freya

“Anyone who touches her dies,” Gage growled, glaring at the wolves who’d killed Ingrid.

When I looked up at Nira, she was waving a knife around as she talked, ignoring Gage completely.

“Delivering your body would be proof of my ‘devotion,’ you know? Then maybe Luka will *finally* go through with it.”

Gage reached a hand down to me, and I took it, rising to my feet. I wiped away my tears, but didn’t bother answering Nira. As far as I could tell, she would do whatever she wanted with us. And I wasn’t about to plead for my life.

Nira stepped closer to me, then grinned when Gage growled.

“I heard your threat.” She waved her knife around again. “Step back, or she’s dead.”

Gage took one step away from me, and Nira rolled her eyes.

“Okay... three more steps back. Don’t make me spell everything out for you, Gage. You’re smarter than that.”

She winked as he slowly backed away to where he could keep an eye on us.

“And you’re smart enough to know not to fuck with my packmates again,” Gage growled. “Tell your lover boy you found her decaying corpse in the forest, too far gone to bring it back to show him. Make up some story. You were always good at that.”

Nira sauntered over to me, and I flinched when she pulled my hair behind my shoulders. Gage growled, and Nira raised both hands as if to show she hadn't touched me, not really.

“Just packmate?” She circled me, then grabbed my wrist and held it up. “Fresh pack mark, not even a tattoo to show for it.” She raised her eyes to Gage. “I take it you were... too busy.”

Gage didn't bother answering, but he crossed his arms. “What do you want, Nira?”

His eyes shone with an intense animosity — I'd thought he hated me on sight, but now I had my doubts. His expression when he'd looked at me had never once reflected the depth of malice it held for Nira. Which had somehow only deepened when she'd touched my wrist. She'd all but signed her own death warrant.

“Honestly? I'm disappointed you didn't mate her,” Nira sighed. “I was hoping to torture her and make you suffer through every second of her agony. But the pack bond is nothing compared to the mate bond. So that won't be any fun.”

She walked around me, but I kept my eyes on Gage, letting him lend me his strength. Nira's little speech didn't seem to faze him, even though I felt sick to my stomach. I didn't know how we were going to get out of this with so many wolves surrounding us. Things didn't look good.

“Ugggh,” Nira groaned, grabbing my chin in her hand. “You look so pathetic, staring at him like that. It's pitiful, really.”

She came around beside me, draping her arm across my shoulders like we were best friends, her head leaning against my head, gazing at her former lover. She wanted to goad him into following through on his threat and attacking her, but Gage was biding his time. He wouldn't play her games. I had the feeling she wouldn't survive this day.

She whispered, “He fucks like the devil, you know.” Then she laughed. “Of course, maybe you *don't* know. Ingrid mentioned a wolf on the verge of her heat, and confirmed she

meant you. Looks like you survived the heat, and I bet Gage couldn't resist fucking you every single day. But you don't remember much, do you?" Then she growled. "Too fucking bad you won't get to have him ever again."

Gage's intense sky-blue gaze bored into Nira. "You know what I think is pathetic? How jealous you are."

Nira growled and wrapped her hand in my hair, pulling my head back and exposing my throat. "Maybe I should just kill her and get it over with."

With my back bowed, I tried not to move, not to do anything that would provoke her into following through on her threat. I had to hope that Gage knew what the hell he was doing.

My eyes searched the sky above, and even in daylight, I caught sight of the nearly full moon. I silently whispered a prayer to Grandmother Moon to get us out of this mess alive.

"Nira..." Gage growled. "It's me you want. You said you wanted me to suffer. I'm right here. Punch me. Cut me. Watch me bleed. Do your worst."

She abruptly let go of my hair, and I barely managed to catch my balance. She lunged forward toward Gage, then kicked him right between the legs. At the last second, I saw his hips twist, and then she was on him, punching and screaming at him.

At first, Gage instinctively defended himself... but I noticed the moment he consciously let her blows land. His hands fell to his sides, and he stood straighter with triumph in his eyes.

His gaze met mine, and he shook his head as if to tell me not to worry. He would take this beating if it meant keeping me safe.

But when one of Nira's punches sent blood flying, my wolf went insane inside of me, demanding I defend him.

Before Karina could stop me, I raced toward Nira. I grabbed one of her long braids with both hands, yanking her away from Gage with all of my strength.

“He’s mine,” I growled, not even recognizing the sound of my own voice.

Inside my mind, my wolf growled right along with me, her eyes wild.

Kill her, my wolf demanded just as Nira whirled on me, her eyes going golden.

Only then did I realize how crazy I was to confront a shifter who could tear my throat out with her fangs. A pack alpha who had us surrounded by loyal wolves.

Her hands came up toward my neck. Fangs pushed free from her lips, and her face jutted out into the beginnings of a wolf’s muzzle.

Before she could reach me, Gage tackled her from behind. In an instant, they were both growling and shifting, their clothing torn to shreds as their massive alpha wolves emerged.

Karina wrapped an arm around my neck from behind, pulling me away from the snarling alphas. She flashed a knife in front of my face.

“Be a good wolf,” she growled in my ear.

Before she could get it to my throat, or any other critical area, I twisted in her arms as I’d learned to do long ago and brought my elbow up, striking her in the head. She growled, and I turned, knocking aside her knife. I continued to punch and kick until I could get away.

Gage would be outnumbered in seconds if I didn’t do something to even the odds. But since I couldn’t shift, I would be no match against the circling wolves.

So, I decided to thin the herd by getting them to come after me. Without looking back, I took off running through the forest, planning to circle back to the vehicle and get weapons.

“Hang in there, Gage,” I whispered, trusting that he would know I was safe enough for now through the pack bond.

Wolves tore through the undergrowth after me, but I didn’t stop to look. They let me run, probably toying with me, but I didn’t care. If I could get to the gun, I might turn the tables.

My heart sank for a moment when I saw two wolves racing toward me. Then I caught sight of the white crescent moonmark on the darker one's forehead. The white wolf beside him blurred through the undergrowth past me, his speed so great that I could feel the wind against my skin.

A symphony of menacing growls, snapping jaws, and vicious snarls echoed through the forest as Heath and Flint tore into my pursuers, but my original plan didn't change. If I wanted to help my packmates, I needed weapons.

Heath and Flint's sudden appearance kept the Frost Fang wolves distracted while I made it over the rocky terrain to the incapacitated van. I quickly retrieved my trusty blade, and Gage's heavy gun from the ground. I did a basic check of the much bigger gun, then rushed right back toward the sound of growling wolves — time was of the essence.

Flint and a Frost Fang wolf were locked in a snarling, growling wrestling match, biting and kicking with powerful teeth and claws. When I saw another wolf circling him, I took aim and fired... almost dropping the gun thanks to the stronger recoil. Fortunately, the wolf went down with a yelp, and I managed to recover from the recoil without disgracing myself. My attack startled the rest, which Flint and Heath used to their advantage, killing their opponents. Heath didn't hesitate to rush over to the one I'd shot, tearing out their throat as well.

My two protectors looked toward me, their beautiful coats covered in the blood of our enemies. I expected to feel fear or disgust, but the emotion that hit me first was pride. My inner wolf reveled in the sight of her mates' victory.

"Let's go help Gage," I told them, and they fell into step beside me as I ran back toward the clearing.

Fear closed my throat when I saw Gage's massive wolf go down underneath four smaller wolves. Despite his size and power, they outnumbered him, and I could tell by the way the other wolves moved that they were coordinating their attacks through their pack bond.

I didn't wait to see how many more might pile onto Gage. Instead, I raised the gun and fired into the air, getting

everyone's attention. Gage used the distraction to shake free of his attackers, snarling and biting until all four paws stood firm again.

Heath and Flint lunged into the fray, attacking the closest two small wolves before they expected it.

With everyone in motion, I was afraid to shoot at anyone, for fear of hitting one of the Howling Echo wolves. Unfortunately, we were still outnumbered, and the tide was turning.

From the corner of my eye, I caught sight of two wolves charging toward me. I brought the gun up and fired, but a voice from behind me startled me, and I missed.

“Unless you want to get shot in the back, drop the gun,” Karina growled.

When I looked over my shoulder, I saw she had her own weapon trained on me. From the look in her eye, I knew she wouldn't hesitate to shoot me. So I leaned down and let Gage's gun fall from my fingers, clattering on the rock underfoot. Then I straightened, with my hands out, palms open.

“Surrender,” she yelled. “Or I shoot your precious fuck-toy.”

My stomach knotted as all the wolves froze. One by one, Nira and her wolves shifted back into their two-legged forms, and the Howling Echo wolves followed suit.

A few Frost Fang wolves headed back into the woods, then returned with clothes that they distributed amongst themselves. Nira pulled on her shirt, her expression thunderous.

The Howling Echo was outnumbered and surrounded, but none of my men looked defeated. All three stood naked and proud in the middle of the enemy. Gage's brows lowered, his lips twisted in a snarl of rage as he glared at Nira. Flint's cool expression revealed no outward sign of concern with the situation. And Heath smirked at one of the wolves he'd been fighting, as if to say, ‘You wouldn't win in a fair fight.’

In that moment, I realized how much I'd come to care for my little pack of outcasts. My heart felt too big to fit in my chest, and I ached to set things right, to get us out of here. Or to turn back time and tell Gage not to chance it, not to meet Ingrid again.

What I wanted more than anything was time — the chance to get to know my pack, the men my inner wolf called her mates. I didn't know how things might shake out between us yet, but I wanted the chance to explore our connection and find out.

And right now, Nira stood in the way of that. She was a power-hungry alpha who clearly didn't care about anyone but herself. She'd used Gage to get closer to the top of the hierarchy, then jumped ship to his brother. And then killed him once she had what she wanted — pack alpha status.

Now she was intending to take over Ironwood as well. For all I cared, she could have my old pack. The assholes deserved a pack alpha like her, though I hated the thought of my adopted mother and my friend Willow suffering under her rule.

All of the stray thoughts in my mind silenced when Nira turned to me and said, "Fight me, Freya, and show Gage how unworthy you are to be in his pack."

Chapter 26

Gage

When I went down beneath the pile of smaller wolves, my greatest regret was that Freya had come back and I would be unable to defend her. Seeing Flint and Heath to either side of her stirred something within my wolf. When she fired her warning shot, I gratefully shook free of my attackers and got right back into the fight, my blood hot.

For a moment, everything felt right as my packmates and I fought against our old pack, the ones who'd cast us out. As my fangs sank into another wolf's fur and flesh, my wolf felt proud to fight for Freya. She'd come back for me, a thought that was so shocking I nearly lost my grip on the other wolf.

Strong mate, my wolf reminded me even as he snarled at the enemy.

I felt like I'd seen a new side to Freya, or perhaps that inner strength had been there all along, and I'd only just noticed it. She couldn't shift, yet she'd returned to fight alongside us as best she could. My heart filled with pride and love for her, and I made quick work of my opponent. I fought my way toward her, hoping to do what I could to keep her safe.

Through the pack bond, I felt Heath and Flint's determination to do the same, even as other wolves surrounded them and separated them from Freya. We were too outnumbered, leaving her undefended. All the fight went out of us when Karina threatened her.

Now the three of us stood naked, shoulder-to-shoulder, helpless to save Freya as my insane ex threatened her. Rage

filled me at Nira's petty words and perverse challenge.

"What do you think, Gage? What will happen when your old flame fights your new one?"

"What do I think?" I growled.

Even though I was naked and unarmed, Nira flinched when I took a step toward her, and I gave a satisfied snarl. I'd promised to kill anyone who touched Freya, which meant Nira was as good as dead.

Then my eyes fell on my mate, standing strong and unafraid beside the woman who'd manipulated both me and my brother.

"What I think is that Freya is ten times the wolf you are. She came back to this fight even though she knew we'd be outnumbered. No, she came *because* we were outnumbered. She's proven herself to be a true packmate to all of us. Over and over, she's been at a disadvantage, yet she survives. She selflessly put herself in harm's way for us, for our pack. She's strong and yet compassionate," I motioned to Ingrid's body, lying not far away.

Then I raised my eyes to Freya's. What I saw there scared me more than any threats. Because when I looked into her eyes, I saw her hidden wolf staring out at me, weighing me, deciding whether I was truly worthy of her.

The desire to claim her as my mate ached as strongly as an empty belly, starved for days on end. My wolf had been pushing to bite her all along, though I'd hoped the urge would die down once her heat ended.

But it was never about the heat. I'd wanted her from the beginning — both me and my wolf. And now that her heat had ended... I wanted her all the more, not any less.

When I realized I'd been broadcasting those feelings down the pack bond where all of them could sense them, I instinctively closed myself off. But Flint's acceptance and approval along with Heath's guarded optimism hit me hard through the bond, leaving me a bit off-kilter. I'd never realized

how important it was for me to do right by Freya — not just for her, or for me, but for all of us in the Howling Echo pack.

“I see you,” I told Freya and her wolf. “You were never the one who needed to prove yourself worthy. It’s me. I didn’t make things easy on you, but I’m proud you’re part of my pack. And one day, I’ll be proud to run beside your wolf.”

Freya’s eyes lit up, the extraordinary blue glinting with intensity, but Nira snarled, stealing my attention. I needed to deal with this threat so I could prove to Freya how much I craved her. I would defend her to my dying breath if I had to, but now, more than ever before, I wanted to live. Not for me, but for her. For my mate.

“Enough,” Nira growled, motioning toward the three of us. “Tie them up.”

“If you attack Freya, it will only show how weak of a leader you actually are,” I growled, stalking toward the traitorous pack alpha until two Frost Fang wolves came to stand in my way.

I glared at them both, remembering they’d been ahead of me in school, but they’d always shown me deference as the pack alpha’s son. When I glanced over my shoulder, I saw Flint and Heath being restrained. It was up to me to intimidate my two guards enough to leave me free to act.

“She’s not even an alpha,” I continued. “She’s no threat to you, Nira.”

Then I stared down both wolves standing in my way as one of them held up some rope.

“But I am,” I reminded them. “With my brother Garth dead, you know I’m the rightful pack alpha of Frost Fang.”

“That’s enough.” Nira’s voice lashed out like a whip as she used her alpha-bark. “Take her away from me before I slit her throat myself.”

Instead of grabbing me, the two wolves grabbed Freya and hauled her away.

“That’s your mistake,” I called after them.

They'd heard my warning, and I tried to keep up my alpha confidence for Freya's sake. If one of them decided to slash her throat or shoot her in the head, I was too far away to do anything about it. So all I could do was hope to intimidate them.

Nira studied my expression. "You're right, Gage. As pack alpha, I shouldn't dirty my hands with taking out the trash. That's why I had your brother killed, you know. I didn't do it myself, even though I could have. He was weak. Not worth my time. Just like your worthless excuse of a 'packmate'."

She was goading me, and I wished I could say it wasn't working. I'd always assumed my father's mates had done it for her, maybe even Karina herself. She'd always hated my father for taking her away from her mate, and she hated both his sons by extension.

But maybe some part of me had hoped Nira hadn't been involved. Some part of me still wished that the woman I thought I'd been in love with still had some kernel of good in her.

Today dispelled any of those false hopes.

"Kill her," Nira said.

"No! Don't hurt her!" I barked out a counter-order.

I was more dominant than Nira, but my alpha command might not be enough to cancel out hers, since these wolves had sworn loyalty to her. I lunged toward Freya to intervene, but more Frost Fang men yanked me back.

"Fight me instead." Desperate words poured from my lips. "I challenge you, Nira, pack alpha of the Frost Fang pack!"

Everyone froze. Glaring at each shifter in turn, I memorized their faces. Though they still restrained me, a sense of relief made my muscles go slack. I'd bought Freya some time, because everyone knew what my challenge meant. But I would spell it out for them just to be dead certain they wouldn't hurt Freya the minute my back was turned.

"I challenge you, Nira, alpha to alpha, for leadership of your pack. A pack that I should lead, by rights. If I win, you

forfeit your place in Frost Fang's hierarchy. Your pack becomes mine."

Nira snarled, but next I turned toward the two men holding Freya captive.

"If anything happens to her, no one will ever find your bodies."

Nira crossed her arms, schooling her expression and clearly trying to decide how to handle this new turn of events.

Then she jutted out her chin and said, "No one's fighting anyone."

Maintaining eye contact with me, Nira tried to prove her dominance through sheer force of will. Yet she gave ground, stepping back until she stood beside Freya.

"Honestly, I'm tired of dealing with you both. I'd rather you both just... go to sleep."

Nira drew a blade and slashed it across Freya's cheek.

"Knock out all of them!" she shouted.

I dove as Freya's knees buckled, and she fell. Her eyes rolled back in her head, and she let out a quiet groan as she slumped to the ground, too far away for me to break her fall. But even from here, my next inhale sniffed out the culprit — poison. Without being able to shift, Freya might not be able to clear it from her system.

I roared in outrage and felt the answering fury from my pack bond with the others. Someone tried to get in my way, but I kicked out the guy's knees, bringing him down to my level. I grabbed his gun in his hands and twisted, using the element of surprise to overpower him. Our limbs tangled together, but I got control of the gun and shot his leg. He let out a cry of pain, and I took the weapon.

Then I pointed upward and shot through one man's open mouth as he yelled and charged me. When he went down, I shot the next one without waiting to see if he planned to attack.

I climbed to my feet, yelling, “You dare intervene in a pack alpha fight?”

I glared over at Nira just as she raised the knife over Freya’s prone form again. As the knife fell, a shot rang out. I’d acted without a thought, and blood sprayed from Nira’s shoulder. She yelped, then shifted to heal.

I followed suit, shifting and charging the moment my paws hit the earth. Nira’s giant alpha wolf form towered over Freya’s inert body, but I lunged. Airborne, I collided with Nira, bowling her off her paws. We landed in a heap, but I gave no quarter, snapping and fighting for more than just my life.

If Nira bested me, the Howling Echo pack would be hers. The fate of my entire pack would be decided by whoever won this match. But so, too, would the fate of the Frost Fang pack.

Wolves circled us, and I guessed that Nira had issued an order through the pack bond to attack. But they hesitated, knowing that interfering in a pack alpha duel meant the victor might order their deaths.

I used my alpha power to broadcast my words openly, something only dominant alphas could do. And I used my alpha-bark to cow them into submission.

“Stand down or face the wrath of your future pack alpha.”

Heath’s alpha command followed mine, reinforcing it to help overpower Nira’s control over them. *“Heed the warning of the Frost Fang heir, or face the consequences.”*

Flint reinforced it still further. *“Stand down!”*

With the weight of three alpha commands to one, the other wolves paused. Our alpha-barks forced the subordinate wolves to wait and see the outcome of the duel.

I steeled myself for whatever might happen next. Freya needed me. My entire pack needed me. And my brother, Ingrid, and the others Nira had wronged deserved justice.

Her orders nullified, Nira charged me — too used to her manipulations succeeding, she was desperate in the face of a

direct challenge she hadn't prepared for. Her ill-conceived attack left her over-committed. When I dodged to the side, her momentum carried her past.

Vicious satisfaction filled me as I grabbed her hind leg in my jaws and crunched down hard, whipping my head to the side and throwing her off balance. She yelped, but I showed no mercy, lunging for her undefended neck.

With a savage snarl, I tore out my former lover's throat. Her body fell lifeless before me. Filled with the primal instincts of my nature, I placed one paw on her body and howled.

I poured all of my emotions into that howl. Joy that I had avenged my brother. Satisfaction that justice had been served and a traitor brought low at last.

Heath and Flint howled right alongside me, filling the clearing with the sound of victory.

But our howl cut off all at once when Freya let out a whimper. Her breathing rattled in her lungs, and her next breath barely lifted her chest.

"Freya!"

Chapter 27

Heath

Gage, Flint, and I took turns at Freya's side, refusing to leave her alone until she healed. Especially since we considered ourselves in hostile territory. Days passed slowly as we waited, anxiously hoping for any sign of change.

The finest healers in the Frost Fang pack kneeled at her bedside, following orders from their new pack alpha to heal his mate or else. But the truth was, no one knew exactly how to treat wolfsbane in a half-breed wolf shifter who couldn't shift.

We even contacted Shante, who contacted Brielle. The healers tried everything Brielle suggested to no avail.

If Freya had been a full witch, perhaps her magical blood would've cleared the poison more easily. If she'd been a full wolf shifter, she might have already been dead, since wolfsbane prevented shifting, which was the only way to heal fast enough to stay ahead of its effects.

It was a wicked poison, and for one wolf shifter to use it on another was enough to make all but the most loyal wolves turn their back on Nira. Many Frost Fang wolves had already done exactly that after word spread that Gage had defeated Nira in a pack alpha duel. Wolves came from across the packlands to swear their loyalty to Gage, their new pack alpha by right of combat.

One day at Freya's bedside, Flint murmured to Gage, "Frost Fang is wondering if you intend to change the name of their pack."

I smirked, noticing how he said ‘their pack.’ The Frost Fang pack had once exiled all of us. Gage may have bested their pack alpha, but Frost Fang would never truly be our pack ever again.

“No,” Gage growled. “We are the Howling Echo. They are Frost Fang.”

His words gave both my wolf and me a great deal of satisfaction. Gage had put his finger on exactly what had been bothering me these last few days... We weren’t Frost Fang. We were the Howling Echo. Nothing would change that.

When one pack conquered another, the victors usually gave their pack name to the conquered. Except in the case of Denraider, where they enslaved most of the conquered, refusing to bring them into the safety of the pack.

On very rare occasions, the victorious pack alpha would come up with a new pack name or an amalgamation of both names, such as Howling Frost or Fanged Echo, but I knew Gage would never go for something like that. Frost Fang held too many dark memories, and he wouldn’t want his past intruding on what he’d built on his own, free of this place.

Still, his new duties as pack alpha over Frost Fang often took him away from Freya’s side, which he hated. But Flint and I reminded him over and over that we would be there for her, and that, as the new pack alpha, only he could do what needed to be done.

In the meantime, that meant Gage assigned me a different task.

“Call Rowan,” Gage said with a strange light in his eyes as he followed Flint from Freya’s room. “There’s no need for him to stay on that job now that things have changed.”

He was right. The jobs we’d once taken to keep the Howling Echo afloat were no longer necessary. Our money troubles had disappeared overnight. Everything that once belonged to Gage’s father, to his brother, or to Nira now belonged to him, as the new Frost Fang pack alpha.

It also meant Gage could distribute the pack's funds however he wanted to. In states like ours that ran under pack law, the pack alpha's decisions were final. His rule went unquestioned. No one could challenge his edicts unless they challenged him for pack alpha status.

As crazy as it sounded, Gage's new status as the pack alpha of Frost Fang solved a lot of our problems. We all knew we could better protect Freya with a big pack behind us. But it also introduced new problems, like not knowing who might stab us in the back. Word had already gotten back to the Ironwood pack somehow that Luka's future betrothed was dead and displaced, leaving the pack alliance in question.

My friend Gage had enjoyed running a small pack that never played by the rules. But now he'd been pulled back into the old game, and there were plenty of political landmines to dance around. Thanks to my father, I could help Gage spot some of them before he stumbled over them, but I was out of practice, too.

Gage hadn't formally decreed Flint and me as his enforcers yet, but since we'd been his enforcers in the Howling Echo pack, no one questioned it. When Flint or I gave an order, most Frost Fang wolves jumped to obey. Not all of our decisions were popular, however...

We executed every one of Nira's allies who'd laid a hand on Freya, just as Gage had promised — including Karina. Then Gage exiled the rest of his father's old mates, the ones who helped Nira kill Garth. Without an ounce of remorse, he sent the older, subordinate female wolves out into the wildlands to die. Our pack alpha knew Frost Fang needed to take him seriously, and he didn't hesitate to show them what happened to traitors.

Out of spite, he began forcing the rest of Frost Fang to swear fealty to him one by one. After all, the pack had done nothing when Garth exiled Gage — none of our old friends had spoken out about it. Frost Fang had even accepted Nira as their sole pack alpha after the mysterious circumstances of Garth's death. Gage wisely didn't trust a soul.

While either Flint or I stayed behind with Freya, the other accompanied Gage to the throne room. Probably under Nira's influence, Garth had become a bit of an egomaniac after banishing Gage and had set up a throne. In the throne room, we took turns with Gage, using our alpha-bark on the wolves who came to bow at his feet, forcing them to tell the truth about where their loyalty lay. We exiled a dozen more wolves in the first five days alone.

Today, it was my turn at Freya's side again, and I took her limp hand, lacing my fingers between hers.

"Wake up for me, Freya," I whispered, wishing my alpha-bark could force her to heal.

I waited patiently for a few minutes, watching the life sign monitors. As always, I grew more and more frustrated by the beeping machines. No change.

Not having anything else to do gave me time to carry out Gage's latest order. With my hand still in Freya's, I grabbed my phone and called Rowan's burner phone. The one we weren't supposed to call except under dire emergency... or to call off the deal. Well, this qualified as both, as far as I was concerned.

He didn't answer, but I didn't necessarily expect him to. The job had put Rowan undercover in a pack I held no love for — the Elder Forest pack, the pack my father had joined after my exile from Frost Fang. The shame of my exile had been too much for my father to bear, so he'd left Frost Fang as well and found a pack that would indulge his political power plays.

A few hours later, the phone vibrated in my hand. It was Rowan calling me back.

"Thanks for calling me back," I said by way of greeting.

Rowan's deep voice was quiet when he responded. "What happened?"

Apparently he still wasn't somewhere safe enough to talk openly, since he knew I wanted nothing to do with my father. I imagined my dark-haired packmate looking over his shoulder, and it made my hackles rise. My wolf hated our packmate

being separated from us, but I wasn't about to admit it. So I cut to the chase.

“Gage challenged Nira, killed her, and took over the Frost Fang pack. Everything's changed, and there's no need for you to finish that job.”

Rowan didn't answer right away. I supposed that was a lot to process.

“What now?”

“Gage wants you to come back.” That would count a lot to a wolf like Rowan, even if he wanted to stay on the job. Despite that, I felt some hesitation in his pause.

“Now isn't the best timing.” Rowan's low voice had me straining to hear him over the beeping of Freya's heart monitor.

Was it just my imagination, or did her fingers flex against mine?

“My departure could invite trouble.”

“Then extricate yourself carefully,” I said reluctantly. “But get to Frost Fang packlands when you can. They're our allies now.”

“Understood,” he said in a firm voice. “I'll be there as soon as I can.”

Without waiting for a reply, Rowan hung up.

Freya's head turned toward me, her eyes still closed. But from her lips, one word fell on a gentle sigh.

“Rowan...”

I gasped and squeezed her hand. “Freya. Wake up, my warrior wolf. Rowan will be here soon to meet you himself.”

I jostled her hand, feeling helpless as her breathing deepened. She remained unconscious.

Heavy footsteps down the hall made me tense until I felt Gage's reassurances reach me along the pack bond. Flint and Gage came around the corner, and both looked simultaneously

relieved and disappointed at what they found. I caught them up on what had just happened.

“She senses Rowan through the pack bond,” Gage mused. “It’s the only explanation.”

“Hopefully he’ll be able to make it here within the next couple of days. I’ll be glad for our pack to be together again,” Flint said from across the room, echoing my earlier sentiments. It had been too long, despite the lucrative job.

“I have every desire to leave here as soon as we can,” Gage admitted, falling into a convenient chair. He dragged his hand over his face in a weary way that told me the situation was draining him faster than I’d thought. “But Freya needs time to heal.”

“It’s not Freya’s fault we’re tied here.” Flint stood near the door in a ready stance, one ear toward the hall. He would know if anyone tried to eavesdrop on us.

“I didn’t say it was,” Gage snapped.

“If she were healed... you would leave?” I asked, surprised.

Gage shrugged, sighing. “I don’t know what I would do. Should I let one of the Frost Fang alphas take over?”

I shook my head. “I know you always expected Garth to lead... but you know everyone always thought you would make the better leader.”

Flint nodded, but Gage frowned and said, “I gave up on Frost Fang a long time ago.”

“But the past few days...” I said, gesturing vaguely in the direction of that ridiculous throne room. “Now more than ever, it’s so obvious how much Frost Fang always needed you. They suffered under Nira. You have to see that. Things clearly weren’t great under Garth before that, either. And if we’re being completely honest, they suffered under your father’s rule as well. We all did.”

I waved at Flint as proof of that. Gage’s father had exiled Flint for something he didn’t even do.

As if I'd passed the speaking stick, Flint echoed my words. "You're a better leader than any of them ever could have been. Some people think that alphas stay at the top of the hierarchy by standing on the backs of lower wolves, but it should be the other way around. Good alphas are the foundation, the ones who keep the pack stable and safe, the ones who serve the pack."

He slashed a hand toward the hallway.

"Frost Fang needs you more than the Howling Echo ever has. And I know you're too honorable to turn your back on them the way they turned their backs on us."

Gage growled in frustration. "Then what? Am I just supposed to give up the Howling Echo? Turn us all into Frost Fang wolves? Leave our lives behind?"

I knew Gage wouldn't be able to live with himself if he abandoned Frost Fang, but I wasn't willing to sacrifice our pack, either.

"No." I would've crossed my arms, but I wasn't willing to give up Freya's hand.

Instead, I looked down at her, thinking about how much everything had changed, even before Gage killed Nira. What would Freya think?

"No," Flint echoed. "We keep doing things the way we always have — we buck tradition. We figure it out together. Just as soon as Rowan gets here..."

His words hung in the air until Gage completed the thought.

"And just as soon as Freya wakes up." Gage's deep and commanding voice made his words feel like an order.

Then the powerful pack alpha leaned over the bed and placed a gentle kiss on Freya's forehead.

His next words may have been a whisper, but Flint and I both heard them, and we both agreed with the sentiment.

"You're my number one priority, princess. Now wake up."

Chapter 28

Freya

I drifted in and out of consciousness, but opening my eyes felt too difficult. From time to time, I heard familiar voices, and I tried to call out to them, but doing so felt impossible. It was like I was caught in molasses and unable to move or speak. When I became aware of people around me, they seemed to move like bees, zipping in and away before I fully registered their presence.

But over time, they slowed down, or I sped up. I could catch snippets of conversations before I fell into a deeper sleep again. And eventually, finally, I could open my eyes.

Heath jolted when I squeezed his hand, then smiled down at me. Tears gathered in the corners of his eyes.

“Freya, you’re awake.”

“Heath,” was all I managed to say before sleep claimed me once more.

This time, I dreamed. A woman smiled at me with pride in her deep-blue eyes. In a scratchy voice, she murmured, “I wanted to destroy the pack alliance, but you ended it so much better than even I had planned.”

The next time I woke up, opening my eyes felt easier. I remembered how hard it had been to wake up last time, and adrenaline flooded my veins.

I’d come too close to dying, and apparently the battle wasn’t won just yet. The edges of my vision blurred with darkness, but I fought.

What would happen to Flint if I stopped fighting?

As if the thought had summoned the man, he rushed to my side.

“How are you feeling?”

“What...” I tried to ask, but getting out the word ‘happened’ seemed impossible.

“You’re going to make it, Freya. You’re pulling through.” Flint’s words seemed like they were meant to reassure me, but instead, they made me wonder why that had been in question. Why did I feel so weak?

Whatever was causing it, I needed to keep fighting. For Flint’s sake. And for my other packmates. Gage had said so many things I wanted to explore. His words had filled me with a warmth I wanted to chase forever. And yes, I wanted to figure things out with Heath as well.

I wouldn’t let unconsciousness claim me again if it meant I might not wake up.

Flint straddled a chair next to my bedside and began spoon-feeding me broth. I only took a few sips before the heavy weight of sleep pressed down on me, my eyes closed against my will, and the world faded away.

The next time, opening my eyes felt even easier, and I came to with Flint and Heath to either side of me. This time I felt strong enough to turn my head and look at my surroundings. I was in a hospital room with all manner of cords and lines running to my body. I really had almost died, hadn’t I?

“What happened to me?” I asked.

Turning my head made me feel woozy, and I brought my hand to my forehead. Cords trailed my arm, and I realized I was hooked up to an IV.

“Nira cut you with a poisoned blade,” Heath explained.

I touched my cheek, remembering. But gauze met my fingertips. Maybe there’d be another scar to add to my collection.

“It was wolfsbane.” Flint growled the word, his voice dripping with disgust.

I didn’t get to ask anything else, because sleep beckoned. But each time I woke up, I felt stronger. And the beeping of the machines bothered me more and more.

“This bed sucks,” I grumbled just before sleep claimed me again.

The next time I woke up, I found myself in an unfamiliar bedroom with a window. And as I rolled over on my side, I realized I was no longer hooked up to a million machines. And the bed was much more comfortable.

“You’re healing fast now,” Flint said from a chair beside my new bed.

I felt more alert, my brain less foggy.

“Is Gage...” I was afraid to ask.

“He killed Nira,” Flint said. “That makes him pack alpha of Frost Fang. He’s been by your side as much as he can.”

“I heard his voice,” I remembered.

Flint nodded. “He’s going to be thrilled you’re awake.”

“I am, too,” I joked weakly.

Flint fed me some more broth, and this time, my stomach growled.

“Think you can handle real food?”

“Maybe.”

Before I knew it, Flint had a full platter brought to my bed. I nibbled on cheese and crackers, and even dared one square of ham. Drowsiness set in fast, but this time, I felt certain I could wake up. After a few more sips of broth, I was out.

The next time I woke up in my comfy new bed, I felt like a million bucks. Like I’d just awakened from the best nap ever.

With Flint’s help, I got up and walked around. I wrinkled my nose and said, “I want a shower.”

He helped me hobble into the ensuite bathroom and into the bathtub after I shucked my hospital gown. His hovering made me feel like a complete invalid.

“I got this,” I snapped at him, then instantly regretted it. “Sorry.”

“At least let me wash your hair,” Flint pleaded with a soothing smile.

His words didn't sound like he thought I couldn't do it, but rather that he desperately wanted to touch me. That's when I realized how worried he must've been. I'd gotten to sleep through my healing process, but he'd been watching over me the whole time, worried I might never pull through.

“Okay,” I said, dipping my head under the spray. “Where are we, anyway?”

“Frost Fang set up a house near the alpha residence. We've all been staying here.”

There was some subtext to his words I couldn't figure out, but my thoughts fled as soon as I had Flint's hands on me.

His fingers on my scalp felt so heavenly, I couldn't help it when a moan escaped. He massaged me some more before guiding me under the water to rinse.

When I turned back, his shirt and pants were soaked, doing absolutely nothing to hide the tent at his hips.

I grinned, and he chuckled. “Don't mind me.”

“Oh, I don't mind at all,” I flirted as he dried me off.

My body responded to his touch as always, issuing invitations I wasn't sure I'd be able to keep. Flint pretended not to notice, probably thinking I was too weak for that kind of fun. Personally, I thought it might help bring me the rest of the way back to life. Though I had to admit, he'd be stuck doing most of the work. And I would likely pass out before we were half done.

“Do you want clothes?”

“Real clothes, please.”

Flint escorted me back out into the bedroom in my towel. His lips parted, but just then he cocked his head. When his beautiful eyes met mine, they sparked with happiness.

“Gage is here. I’ll let you two catch up while I find you some clothes.”

Flint stepped out into the hall just as Gage appeared. He rushed toward me, then pulled up short, as though he’d been about to hug me before changing his mind.

“Freya, they kept telling me — I’m just glad you’re awake!”

I laughed. I’d never heard the pack alpha get tongue-tied before. But when his eyes traveled lower, I realized maybe the fact that I was standing in nothing but a towel had something to do with it. Or maybe the fact that I still smelled of arousal from seeing Flint’s hard-on. My heat was long over, but that didn’t seem to change how easily I responded to them.

“I was so scared,” Gage admitted, his heavy hands falling on my naked shoulders. “Seeing Nira attack you...” he shook his head. “She used wolfsbane. Then she tried to kill you while you were unconscious and defenseless,” he growled.

“But you protected me,” I said, desire flaring at the thought of this tall, powerful man protecting me when I was completely defenseless.

I stepped toward him and ran my hand over his hard chest, up to his shoulder. His eyes darkened as his tongue darted out to wet his lips.

“The deal’s done,” I went on. “You didn’t have to protect me anymore.”

“Of course I did,” he said gruffly. “You’re pack. But even if you weren’t... I would’ve come for you anyway.”

Gage hooked his finger under my chin, then leaned in for a kiss. He moved slowly, as if afraid of startling me. It took me a moment to realize he was giving me the chance to say no, to turn my head, to deny him the kiss.

But denying him would've been denying something I wanted just as much. My eyes fell to his lips, and I tilted my chin up even more, giving him better access to my lips.

When his mouth met mine, he poured all of his emotions into the kiss. His lips gently nuzzled mine until I opened for him, and then he kissed me like he was rewriting the last several days in his head.

He started slowly, as gentle and hopeful as he must have been while waiting for me to wake. Then his tongue caressed mine more eagerly, our desire growing. Wrapping his arms around me, he clutched me close, almost desperately, as he deepened the kiss, and I could feel through our bond that he was as relieved as he was aroused that we were able to reconnect like this.

His large hands clenched around my towel, then ripped it away. He stepped back, his chest heaving as his eyes took in the sight of me. Gage stalked around me like a predator deciding where to take his first bite as I stood naked and vulnerable in front of him.

When he circled back in front of me, the satisfaction in his eyes made me realize he'd been checking me for injuries, for any lingering sign of what I'd suffered.

"You should have let Heath and Flint escort you to safety," Gage growled, his eyebrows lowered. "I could've handled Nira alone."

Just hearing her name made my blood heat with fury. She'd used me to get to Gage. She'd hurt him again, thanks to me.

"You never should have come back for me," he continued.

Now my body heated for a different reason. Did my pack alpha want to punish me for endangering myself?

I looked up at him through my eyelashes, pretending to be chastised. Then I used his own words against him. "You're pack. But even if you weren't... I would've come back for you anyway."

Gage closed the distance between us faster than I could blink, his arms wrapping around me once more, pulling me to him. His lips crashed against mine in a bruising kiss, making me whimper with need. Without a scrap of clothing on, my wetness slicked down my inner thighs.

He pulled back, his nostrils flaring, his eyes wild. “Tell me it’s too soon. Tell me you’re not finished healing, and I’ll back off.”

He ran a hand down my cheek, and I realized the bandage was gone. Had it scarred? Could he feel it? Did I look any different?

Then my brain caught up with his words. Back off? Hell no. I’d nearly died. Now I wanted to feel alive.

“I want you now, Gage. I don’t want to wait.”

Chapter 29

Freya

His lips quirked up in a savage smile, his eyes going hard. “I should punish you for putting yourself at risk, but if you’re not well...”

He pulled his shirt over his head in that sexy way men do, making all his muscles ripple as he did so. Then his hands went to the button in his jeans. He slowly unzipped, revealing his hardness.

“Let me make it up to you,” I said, sinking to my knees and yanking his pants down around his ankles.

And if my descent was a little less controlled than it should be, we silently agreed to ignore it in favor of indulging ourselves.

His hard length confronted me, and I set upon him like a starving woman, taking him into my mouth and stuffing him down my throat. Gage let out a grunt that might’ve made me smirk if I wasn’t so busy filling my mouth with him.

“Freya...” he moaned my name.

My thighs were no longer damp. They were all but dripping.

I looked up at him, and his hand cupped the back of my head. His fingers twisted in my hair, and then he took charge, moving in and out of my mouth. When I made no move or sound of protest, his eyes hardened.

“Next time you earn a punishment, I’m going to spank you so you won’t want to sit for days,” he promised, shoving his dick so far down my throat my eyes watered.

I moaned around his cock as soon as he pulled it back enough for me to breathe. How did he manage to make everything sound so sexy?

“That’s right, princess,” he said, thrusting back in. “The deal protected you before. But now... You’re going to be at my mercy, and I’m dying to turn you over my knee and paint that sexy ass red.”

I moaned my agreement, and he smirked down at me, nostrils flaring as he scented how much his words were turning me on.

“I love fucking that pretty mouth of yours.” The hand in my hair suddenly disentangled itself, and he stepped free of his pants. “But I love fucking that pretty pussy more.”

He sat down on the chair, then patted his knee. I rose to my feet, his eyes on me, watching for any sign of trouble. I had the feeling he wouldn’t give me what I wanted if he knew how weak I still felt.

So, I waited until I felt steady enough, then sashayed toward him with a hand on my hip. “Are you waiting for me, alpha?”

“This time, I want you to fuck me,” he growled. “Show me how much you want this cock inside you.”

Gage knew how to push my buttons. But I knew how to push his, too. He enjoyed being the one in charge. He liked when I obeyed him.

Instead, I strutted past him, dragging my fingertips along his shoulders as I circled around behind the chair.

“Are you trying to earn a spanking, princess?” he growled. “Provoke me all you want, but I won’t touch that ass until I’m sure you’re healed.”

When I came around the other side, I asked, “How many times are you going to spank me, alpha?”

He looked up at me, and I knew I couldn’t wait much longer. I wanted to jump on this sexy man and make us both

scream in ecstasy. But I'd learned something from Gage... The wait made the release so much sweeter.

“For putting yourself in danger and getting hurt?” He narrowed his eyes at me. “One for each day you were unconscious.”

His arm snaked around my hips, hauling me over his lap until my legs straddled him. He grinned as he slammed my hips down on his while he bucked his up, pushing himself deep inside me in one abrupt thrust. The instant stretch and burn made me breathless with pleasure and just the right bite of pain. I shuddered as my body adjusted, pulling a groan from him as my inner walls clenched and relaxed around the sudden intrusion.

“Fuck, you're so tight.” He grabbed my hips and moved me up and down on him as I writhed with the joy of being filled.

Then I teased, “I thought you wanted me to fuck you this time, alpha.”

He growled, then dropped his hands, caressing my thighs. “If you're ready for the workout, be my guest.”

As I began bouncing up and down on him, I soon realized what he meant. My thighs burned in a matter of minutes.

I felt like the woman who filled up her plate and then realized her eyes were bigger than her stomach. I desperately wanted to keep spearing myself on Gage's cock... but my thighs couldn't keep up. My body didn't feel as strong as it once had.

I groaned in frustration as I sank down on him once more in defeat, my hips fully seated against his, my calves and ankles bumping against the chair legs. But Gage's big palms remained resting on my thighs. His thumbs made circles on my skin, but he made no move to help. When I glared at him, he grinned. His dick twitched inside me, and I moaned with absolute hunger.

“Fine, fuck me then,” I growled.

His feral grin widened. “You know what I want to hear.”

I groaned in annoyance. He loved making me beg even when I was on top, apparently.

“Please, alpha, fuck me.”

“Tell me you’re mine.”

With a smirk, I said, “Please, alpha, fuck me and make me yours.”

He grabbed my hips and lifted me easily. Flexed like this, his biceps and shoulders looked carved from stone, tempting me to sink my teeth into them just to prove they weren’t. Distracted, it took me a moment to realize he was keeping me suspended with nothing more than the tip of him inside me.

The determination on his face said he intended to leave me hanging until I gave him what he demanded. I clenched on almost nothing, the emptiness making me ache.

“Please, alpha.” This time my begging was real. “Give me your cock. I’m yours.”

He slammed up into me, canting his hips as he pulled me down on him, making me see stars. Then he did it again.

My hands sought purchase on his shoulders as he took me for a ride, his biceps bunching as he lifted me again and again. As the pleasure grew, my fingers twitched with uncontrolled need, my fingernails scratching at his skin.

“Yes, princess. Mark me as yours,” he growled, pounding into me over and over.

Yes, my wolf growled. Mine.

I agreed with her. Gage really was all mine now. That bitch who’d hurt us was gone. Only we remained.

Something primal rose inside of me. My fangs itched in my mouth, and I felt my wolf stronger than ever. She wanted out. She wanted to take Gage for herself, to bite and mark him as her own.

“You’re mine,” I growled, my voice sounding rougher than I’d ever heard it.

“Yes,” he hissed through clenched teeth, as though barely holding himself back.

The next time he pounded deep into me, I curled forward and licked the top of his shoulder all the way up his neck.

“Fuck, princess.”

He pulsed inside of me. It was the first time I remembered him ever losing control before I did. And it got me hot. This big man between my thighs couldn't contain himself. He might think he was in charge, slamming up into me like that. But in the end, my words pushed him over the edge.

His hips stuttered, and his arms pulled me tight against him as he filled me with his heat. I held him close, wanting to touch as much of him as possible in this moment. I wrapped my arms around his neck, clinging to him as he panted in my ear.

But doing so brought his mouth close to my throat. His chest expanded as he breathed in my scent.

“I can't keep fighting this,” he groaned as his body twitched with the last spasms of his orgasm. “You're mine, too.”

His normally growly voice changed, and I realized his vocal cords must have partially shifted. Making him come first had already pushed me to the brink, so when his mouth descended on my shoulder, his bite pushed me over the edge.

I screamed as my orgasm hit me hard... centered not just on where our bodies joined below, but also where his fangs entered my flesh. My inner walls clenched on his rock-hard dick, milking him for every drop.

With his fangs and dick simultaneously buried inside me, I lost my mind. The sharp pain in my shoulder perfectly complemented the pleasure flooding through my body as my wolf tried to claw her way out to reach her mate.

I shook in his arms, throwing my head back in a wordless scream as I tried to take him even deeper, my hips grinding into his lap. But despite my thrashing, his fangs remained

lodged in me. Gage and I were completely joined, and my climax reached a whole new level.

Gage and I were still attached at the hips when he pulled his mouth back and started licking the wound.

“Ohhhh, yesssssss,” I moaned in ecstasy, my brain going haywire with what felt like electricity dancing through every particle of my essence.

With every lick of his tongue, my body jolted, sending shockwaves of pleasure through me and prolonging my seismic orgasm.

“Mine,” he growled, his voice returning to normal.

Mine, my wolf echoed. *Bite him back*.

I gasped, my eyes flying open as I realized what had just happened.

“What did you do?” I yelped, trying to pull away from him.

Gage’s arms circled me in an iron grip, and as his eyes met mine, my jaw fell open. A glowing purple mark had appeared on his cheekbone beneath his eye.

I studied the symbol. With a certain squint, it almost looked like a capital letter F. A long vertical line stretched from under his eye to the bottom of his nose. From the right side, instead of the perpendicular lines in an F, two shorter diagonal lines slashed downward in parallel.

“Freya...” Gage said, surprise and wonder both filling his voice as his fingers traced a spot below my collarbone.

That’s when I knew the same symbol also marked my skin.

“Gage,” I growled back, annoyed he wouldn’t let me go.

I needed to look in the mirror and see if for myself. And I needed to see the other mark... the one he’d left with his fangs. I couldn’t believe it until I saw it for myself. Had he really just claimed me as his mate?

Part of me felt elated — my wolf, I realized. She’d always wanted to belong, to have a pack, to find her place. Now she

had a pack and a mate. A powerful mate — a pack alpha.

But icy dread spilled through me as I wondered where that left the other two wolves I'd opened my heart to. Gage was the most dominant alpha I'd ever met, and alphas never shared. What if, by claiming me, his wolf wouldn't allow anyone else to be with me now?

This couldn't be happening.

He'd done this with no warning, without asking me first, without considering how I might feel about it... or what it might mean for my relationships with the others. The ice in my veins turned to molten lava, radiating from the claiming mark that now branded my flesh and filling my eyes with hot tears.

Abruptly, Gage let go of me, his eyes round with shock. I leaped away, as eager to put distance between us as I had been to get close to him earlier. He reached for me as I stumbled, my legs shaky from the position and exertion, but I dodged his hand.

“Freya, you—”

“No!” I shouted. “You don't get to mark me as your property. Why do alphas always take advantage of me while I'm weak?”

I needed to see it, to be sure, before full-on panic set in. I launched myself at the mirror, cringing at the first sight of my naked body since I'd awoken.

The muscles I'd once cultivated had faded, and my ribs were startlingly obvious beneath my skin. Deep, dark bags beneath my eyes revealed a weariness that even days of unconsciousness hadn't cured. Even my hair looked limp, the white color not helping.

Beneath my eye, in the same spot where the glowing mark had appeared on Gage's face, a fresh pink scar marred my skin.

And below that, where my shoulder met my throat... a ring of teeth marks reddened my skin, though they didn't bleed. From the shape of them, this clearly wasn't the mark of a

human's mouth, but it also didn't match the wolf bite on my wrist, the pack mark Gage had given me. As was customary, he'd partially shifted to bite and claim me.

To give me his mate mark... I shuddered with the implications behind that.

But I wasn't ready to think about it, because lower still, underneath my prominently displayed collarbone? A foreign mark that made no sense.

An F-like rune that matched the one on Gage's face.

His hulking form filled the mirror behind me, and I simultaneously wanted to punch him and hide in his arms, burying my face in his throat.

So instead I did the totally mature thing. I straightened my shoulders, examined this weak new version of my body, and changed the subject.

"How long was I out?"

"Fifteen days." He ran a hand down from my shoulder to my wrist, leaving goosebumps in its wake.

My eyes met his in the mirror, and I raised my chin in defiance. He was the pack alpha of two packs. His word was law on his packlands, within his influence. Now that he'd just marked me as his mate, everyone would know I was his. His and his alone. Without a reciprocating mark from me — a mark I couldn't give him without my wolf — the bond between us only went one way.

I belonged to Gage, my new mate, the pack alpha, but according to pack law, he didn't belong to me.

He'd effectively made me his property, his to do with as he pleased. This was worse than the deal we'd once struck. Gage owned me completely now.

Chapter 30

Freya

“Freya, you’re safe,” Gage said, his hands toward me as if to calm down a wild animal. “You’re safe with me. You’re safe here in the Frost Fang pack. We’re okay. And we’ll never have to struggle to survive again. I can take care of you, if you’ll let me.”

“Who are you trying to convince?” I growled. “Me or yourself?”

Weak and angry and sad and hungry, my emotions surged.

Why did alphas always think they could just take what they wanted without asking? He’d taken advantage of the situation, where he had me vulnerable, to satisfy an impulse without even considering my consent.

What if this meant that Flint could never mark and claim me how Gage had? Would the future I’d been imagining with Flint ever come to pass?

I whirled, my arm flying, ready to lash out at him. But he was ready for me, his hands up. He caught my fist before I even realized I’d thrown a punch.

Despair knotted in my stomach. Of course he knew what I was going to do. He’d claimed me, and that meant he could sense all my emotions — maybe even my thoughts.

“Fuck, can you read my mind?” My voice came out so high-pitched and panicky, I barely recognized it.

“Of course not. Calm down, Freya.” Gage so rarely said my name that it really gave me pause.

I'd accepted the pack bond, which would allow him to sense my strongest emotions, especially if I was in danger. But this was different. This was how alpha males kept control of their female mates, by using an unequal mate bond to spy on them constantly.

After Wilder had realized I would never shift, he'd taken a different mate in Ironwood, and I'd given up hope of ever having a mate of my own. But then Flint had given me space to dream, and he'd promised me an equal mating where we both bit each other at the same time. Gage hadn't waited for my wolf to emerge — had he wanted our mating to be one-sided all along?

"You think that because I'm a half-breed, I don't know what the mate mark does?"

"Of course I don't think that—"

"You took away my choice," I growled.

"Freya," the alpha's stern voice warned. "If you know about mate marks, then you know the mate bond can't be forced."

My eyes widened. "You think I wanted you to claim me with an unequal mating bite?"

Gage frowned, and I caught a flash of hurt in his eyes before he put up his guard again. His expression shifted into the blank mask he only let down around his pack — his *real* pack, the Howling Echo.

But I steeled myself against remorse. He'd never asked me. Without even hesitating, he'd taken away my ability to choose my mate.

"The deal is over," I growled. "You don't own my body anymore. I'm not your property to do with as you please!"

Gage turned away, his voice low and steady. "As my mate, you have the protection of Frost Fang, because they'll consider us the Alpha Pair. We can rule together." Then he glared at me, his words becoming more passionate. "I shared my power with you. Why would you be mad about that?"

“I don’t want your power!” I yelled.

How could he even think that’s what this was about?

My outburst freaked out part of me, reminding me not to talk back to an alpha like this. But the rest of me couldn’t care less, furious that he’d done this without asking.

“I promised one day both our old packs would pay,” Gage reminded me. “This is our chance to get back at Ironwood for everything they did to you. We can rule Frost Fang together and bring Ironwood to its knees.”

Why did my wolf feel so content? Gage and I were fighting, but she was practically preening with self-satisfaction. That only fueled my anger more. Of course, she was happy to have snagged a pack alpha for a mate.

But he wouldn’t even apologize for what he’d done. And now he thought to soothe me by sharing his stolen power?

“I don’t want to rule, especially over Frost Fang! What makes you think they’ll even fight Ironwood? They wanted to ally themselves with my old pack, the pack that cast me out. No thanks!”

“In case you forgot, Frost Fang cast *me* out,” Gage growled. “You think I want to rule them? I killed Nira for you. To protect you.”

He grabbed my upper arms, his sky-blue eyes burning as he glared down at me like he could force me to agree.

“No, you challenged Nira as pack alpha. You wanted to take back Frost Fang, your birthright. Don’t pretend that had anything to do with me.”

I shook my head. He was avoiding the actual issue by making this about some vendetta against Ironwood. Just like the Ironwood alphas I’d grown up with, Gage’s actions showed he cared more about himself than he did about me.

“I didn’t ask for this.” I yanked free from his grasp.

Gage ran a hand through his hair. “Alright, fine. Would you rather I give up the Frost Fang pack? Because I can, Freya. Say the word, and it’s done. Is that what you want?”

I stared at him in disbelief. He hadn't given me the chance to choose the bite, but now he put the fate of an entire pack in my hands?

I scoffed, shaking my head. "Seriously?"

I imagined Flint returning with my clothes and finding Gage's mark on me. He was going to be crushed, and his disappointment would make this all so much worse.

I could handle my disappointment — I was used to being disappointed. I could survive this because I'd already proven I could survive anything.

But to see the hope go out of Flint's eyes when he realized I was a taken woman? That he and I would never be mates? I wanted to run so I would never have to see the betrayal on his face when he found out.

"You took Flint from me," I whispered as my eyes filled with tears.

"What?" Gage asked, his eyebrows drawn down in confusion.

Suddenly, I wondered why Flint hadn't returned sooner. Why he hadn't come bearing my clothes yet? He had to have heard me yelling.

Gage was shaking his head. "Why would you—"

"Where's Flint?" I asked, suddenly suspicious.

Gage's eyes narrowed. "I used the pack bond to ask for privacy while we talked this through."

"Privacy?" I laughed, dimly aware of how hysterical it sounded. "How lucky for you that you can just boss your packmates around and get *privacy*. Something I'll never have again!"

"Freya..."

"No. I don't want to hear any more."

Since I'd met them, I was the one who had to go along with whatever the alphas decided. I wasn't involved in the serious discussions, my voice wasn't factored into the

decisions, I had almost no control over what we did or where we went. And I'd put up with it with minimal complaint, willing to earn my place over time. Now, suddenly, he wanted to make us the alpha pair? Unbelievable.

"I refuse." That was the only power I could still claim. "We will not be the alpha pair of Frost Fang. Keep the pack, and you can keep your 'power,' too. I don't want it."

Gage's eyes widened, and his expression went from disbelief to anger to fury.

"You're rejecting me?" He snorted. "This mark you put on my face says otherwise."

When I didn't answer, he stalked toward the window and gazed outside. In that moment of silence, the idea of rejecting him wrenched my insides.

I wasn't angry because I didn't want Gage — it was because I wanted *all* of them. If he'd asked me before he bit me, I would've wanted to talk everything through first, to find out whether it was even possible to have multiple mate marks and multiple mate bonds.

But I didn't get the chance.

I opened my mouth to explain all of that, but with his back to me, he started talking.

"I'll have to maintain control of a hostile wolf pack while branded with a witch's mark. The mark of a woman who doesn't even want me... How stupid of me to believe you might actually care as much about me as I care for you."

His words twisted a knife in my gut and stole my breath away. I didn't want to see from his perspective — he was the one who'd put us into this situation. He'd brought this on himself.

I didn't deserve to feel guilty over what he'd done. But before I could remind him of that, he turned around, shutting himself away from me with crossed arms and a grim expression.

“Well, there’s no fixing this today. We’re stuck together now, each with each other’s mark.”

I was about to protest when he pointed at his face. The words died in my throat. Then he headed for the door.

“If you choose to reject my mate mark, it has to be done under the full moon,” he reminded me in a too-calm voice.

As far as I knew, there were only two ways to destroy a mate bond. Either one mate died. Or one mate rejected the other, which had to be done with the blessings of Grandmother Moon, like he said.

My entire being cringed away at the thought. I didn’t want to reject him. Not really. But to live the rest of my life without Flint? Without Heath? The thought destroyed me.

With his hand on the doorknob, Gage drew himself up. “As for the witch’s mark...”

I braced myself for whatever scathing remark he was about to make. Alphas hated being made to look like fools, and apparently that’s what he felt like with this strange mark on his face. Even though it wasn’t my fault that it had shown up on both of us.

Over his shoulder, he said, “As your pack alpha, I order you to find out how to sever a witch’s mate bond. If you choose to reject my mate mark, you must also remove your mark from me.”

I stared at his broad back in anger. So he was making this my problem now?

“Gage—” I growled, but before I could say more, he threw open the door and strode out.

I wanted to yell at him, to tell him this was all his fault for biting me to begin with, but I fell silent when he pushed past someone in the hallway.

Flint carried a stack of neat, folded clothing in his arms. His eyebrows rose as he looked from Gage to me.

The pack alpha stormed down the hallway without a backward glance, leaving me to deal with the fallout of his

actions yet again.

His expression carefully neutral, Flint's eyes fell to my shoulder and then to the mark below my collarbone. Then his steady gaze climbed up to meet mine.

“Flint...” I sighed out his name as sadness gripped my heart like a vise. “We need to talk.”

Chapter 31

Gage

It took every ounce of control not to leave the den and destroy things. Frost Fang wolves — my former packmates, now mine to command — fled from my rage as I strode toward the throne room.

Freya didn't want me. She rejected me. I'd done everything in my power to protect her, and she'd thrown it all in my face.

She had no idea how hard it had been to resist biting her all the other times we'd been together. Especially during her heat. How much angrier would she have been if she'd slowly awakened from her lust-fueled haze with a bite mark on her shoulder?

I didn't know where I was going, I just knew I needed to get away from our den. From the place that smelled so much like Freya's delicious scent and the incredibly hot sex we had.

She'd enjoyed every minute of it. I knew she had. After I'd bitten her, I'd sensed pure ecstasy filling her as she came on my cock with my fangs buried in her shoulder. I'd loved feeling her come apart as I gave her the best orgasm of her life.

But as soon as she came back down... I shivered with the memory of her shock and horror. She'd been enjoying herself until she realized what I'd done. My bite had *repulsed* her. And I'd felt it... through our new mate bond.

Her disappointment, sadness, and fear made my wolf go insane with the desire to protect her from something he couldn't save her from — being bonded to me.

With a roar, I slammed through the door of the pack house, splintering it straight down the center. I prided myself on never losing control, yet I'd surrendered to my need for her, letting my instincts take over. And now, her rejection made me lose control all over again.

I was as bad as my father for claiming her without her permission, when she couldn't bite me in return. He hadn't let any of his mates bite him, and Garth hadn't let Nira bite him. I couldn't stand the thought that I was no better than them.

I was probably flooding all my pack bonds with fury, but I didn't care. When I came out of the hallway and into the rear of my brother's stupid fucking throne room, everyone froze. With the way they stared like they were caught in the high beams, you'd think they were deer shifters.

Heath raised a hand from where he'd been sitting on the wide arm of the throne, no doubt playing up his carefree persona with whoever had been bringing issues to his attention. But when he saw me, all playfulness fled.

He raised his voice and shooed the Frost Fang wolves away. "Everyone out. The pack alpha and I have things to discuss."

The Frost Fang wolf at the foot of the throne hesitated, glancing over at me for a moment. I recognized him — a mid-ranked beta who'd curried favor with my father, for all the good it did him.

He took one look at me, bowed, and then dashed out of the room with the rest of the wolves who'd been lined up for an audience. Frost Fang had paraded their never-ending problems past me ever since I'd gotten rid of their toxic leader. But no one would want my judgment on them today.

Once Heath and I were alone, I realized my steps hadn't brought me to the throne room. They'd brought me to *him*, my trusted enforcer, my first packmate, my childhood best friend. The only person who might pull me back from the brink of insanity.

“What happened?” Heath asked, jumping down from the throne. “Is Freya okay?”

When he got closer, his brows drew down as he noticed the mark on my cheek.

“Oh she’s fine, great, fucking fantastic,” I growled, turned away from him so I didn’t have to see his reaction. “She’s with Flint.”

“Okay...” Heath followed me around, forcing me to look at him since I wasn’t childish enough to turn my back on him again. “And how are you?”

I stared at him, waiting to see that telltale smirk of his. Or pity. Or something that would give me an excuse to lash out at him. Anger and frustration were eating me alive. I needed to put this negativity somewhere. It needed *out*.

But Heath’s expression showed only somber concern. Not amusement at the mark on my face. Not pity.

“I need to run,” I said.

Heath didn’t hesitate. He shrugged off his sling bag, then his clothes, stuffing them into the bag. “Then let’s go.”

As soon as my four paws hit the throne room floor, I charged back down the hallway I’d come from so we could go out the door I’d already destroyed.

“This way.”

“It’s times like this I wish the pack bond went both ways,” Heath growled.

He should be glad it didn’t... The negative avalanche of my emotions would’ve knocked my packmates on their asses if I’d allowed all of it through the pack bond. Bad enough the little I’d let leak through already. Other alphas could dampen my sense of them through the pack bond, but they couldn’t shut me out completely. As pack alpha, I could.

When my control wasn’t already tested.

“Care to enlighten me about what’s going on?”

“Freya rejected me,” I answered, hating how easily she’d destroyed me. I raced toward some familiar woods.

Heath didn’t press me for more as he ran side-by-side with me through the forest like we’d never left. We’d run together through these woods under almost every full moon before my brother had cast me out.

And almost every full moon, Heath had ended the run with a new wolf. Sometimes wolves I knew for a fact he didn’t even like that much.

Part of me suspected it was to piss off his father, who never wanted him to mate with a wolf at all. My father often sent Heath’s father away on political matters, and anytime he returned, Heath flaunted a new wolf shifter lover in front of him. And every time, his father lectured him about how they needed to strengthen alliances by marrying into powerful witch covens and fae families far beyond nearby shifter packs.

“Remember that time Sven came onto you under the Full Crow Moon?” Heath laughed in my mind, but even though his words had no actual sound, I still sensed the tension in them.

“Yeah. I still feel bad for the way I told him off. I should’ve thought of a nicer way to let him down.”

I’d been shocked that a male wolf would ever consider I might be interested in him. All I could think of was how my father would have been horrified. He had very old-fashioned opinions, and if he thought for a second that his son might not be perfectly straight, he’d have been disappointed in the extreme.

I’d reacted on gut instinct when I rejected the poor wolf, embarrassing him in front of everyone with my resounding no. And like an idiot, I hadn’t just rejected him along a private thought. I’d broadcast it for everyone nearby to hear. He’d slinked away, head lowered in shame, and I’d heard he moved to a distant village at the edge of Frost Fang packlands where he could lick his wounds in private.

A wise decision. I felt like doing much the same right about now. Maybe that’s why Heath had brought it up.

"This isn't the same," I growled at him as we crested a rocky slope.

"Not saying it is. I just — never mind," Heath said.

"I bit her," I admitted.

"Did she like it?" Heath asked, his ears swiveling toward me as if to catch my words, despite the fact that they were all in our heads.

"She fucking loved it — in the moment." I sighed along our mental connection as we loped down the other side of the slope.

"And then she realized what it meant."

"I told her the Frost Fang pack would see us as the Alpha Pair. That we could finally strike back at Ironwood—"

Heath laughed. He fucking laughed in my head. I whirled on him, nipping at his throat, but he danced away.

"I love you, Gage, but you're a real idiot sometimes."

I growled and charged him, but he simply sidestepped. We'd grown up wrestling and tangling together in our wolf forms. We knew each other too well to take each other by surprise. That didn't change the fact that my anger had found a target at last.

"She's probably freaking out that this means she can't be with Flint, and here you are making declarations of war."

I pulled up short. His words rendered me as breathless and frozen as if he'd dumped a bucket of ice water on me. I remembered her whispered words, saying that'd I'd taken Flint from her. Could she be right about that?

"No," I gasped.

My wolf longed to howl, to seek the comfort of my pack. But I couldn't — my breath hitched painfully as I realized I'd hurt my mate and possibly betrayed one of my closest friends. I didn't deserve the comfort of the pack.

"That's the real reason Flint never bit her after her heat ended," I realized.

Flint kept insisting she would choose all of us when her wolf appeared, but I hadn't given much thought to the logistics of that. Normally, wolves mated in pairs. Did my bite make it impossible for the others...

"I don't know," Heath admitted.

I didn't either, but I felt sick thinking of what I'd done.

He led me to the lookout point where we'd often hung out as kids. We would sit here for hours, looking down toward the pack house, the alpha residence, and all the surrounding pack housing on one side, and the next town over on the other.

It used to make me feel like a king, yet I'd never wanted to take my brother's birthright. Garth had always wanted it more than I had. I'd never resented him for it, even though I'd always been slightly more dominant than him. Now here I was, pack alpha in his place. And it was even harder than I'd ever imagined.

"She told me she doesn't want to rule."

"Neither did you," Heath reminded me. *"It doesn't change the fact that you are a natural-born leader. That you care more about others than for yourself."*

I snorted. *"Tell that to Freya. She seems pretty convinced I'm just another alphahole like those bastards in Ironwood right now."*

Worse, I was starting to think she might be right.

"What are you going to do?"

I sighed and laid down with my head on my paws, watching the sunset. *"I shouldn't have bit her."*

Heath chuckled, then settled in beside me. *"She marked you, too."*

"She didn't mean to. I think she was as surprised as I was. And when she saw the matching mark under her collarbone..."

"Was it the exact same mark?" Heath asked.

"Exactly the same."

“It seems like a rune... We’ll have to look it up and see what it means.”

Heath’s words soothed something in me. It was a reminder that he was on my side, and that he would help me through any situation, no matter how dire. He had always been there for me.

Even when my own brother exiled me, Heath had been right there to defend me, earning his own banishment in the process. Then Heath’s illustrious father had rejected Frost Fang for daring to exile one of his children, and taken the rest of Heath’s siblings with him to the Elder Forest pack. He’d invited — commanded — Heath to join him, but instead, Heath had followed me into the wildlands.

“Can you sense her?” Heath asked, and I swear I felt something like jealousy emanating from him across the pack bond.

“Yes. She’s... calmer now. Not as scared and frustrated.”

I hated the thought that what I’d done had scared her in any way. It was one of the reasons I’d been close to destroying the pack house.

“I think she and Flint are cuddling.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?” Heath asked, picking his head up from his front paws.

“No...” I answered slowly, realizing for the first time how weird that was.

My wolf felt content, knowing that Flint was protecting her. Even when I sensed them lying in bed together — the mate bond gave me greater insight into Freya than the pack bond ever had.

Still, her feelings toward Flint felt stilted in the mate bond. Like she wasn’t allowing herself to fully relax into the bed beside him.

“And I even sensed it when Flint touched the bite mark,” I went on. *“With his lips. That’s strange, right?”*

“You’re an alpha who’s not losing his mind about his mate literally in bed with another alpha. An alpha who apparently kissed the mark you left on her.” Heath laughed. *“I’d say that’s fucking strange, yeah.”*

All I wanted was to soothe her fears through the mate bond. Her discomfort, disappointment, and worry ate at me. I desperately wanted to make her feel comfortable and safe, but my presence had the opposite effect, and that destroyed me.

Freya couldn’t feel me through the one-sided mate bond... but she could feel me through the pack bond. So I sent her reassurances, trying to calm her mind and ease her fears. It seemed to help, because I felt her settle in next to Flint. And in turn, that soothed me.

“I can’t lose Freya.” I sighed. *“My feelings for her are infinitely stronger than what I felt for Nira. I thought I loved her back then... I didn’t even know what love is.”*

Heath said nothing, and the whisper of the nighttime wind through the branches overhead did little to soothe the ache in my chest.

“And to think you once had me drop her off in the middle of the wildlands,” Heath laughed, but his laugh felt hollow.

My rumble met his words. I knew he didn’t mean to make fun of me, but it reminded me how much of a fool I’d been then — and how much of a fool I was being now. I’d let my mate down, despite wanting to do right by her.

I needed to figure out how to prove to her that I was worthy of her. That I hadn’t meant to hurt her. That I wasn’t trying to stand in the way of her being with the others if she wanted to.

Heath tilted his head and got to his paws to stretch. We both heard the telltale whispers of brush moving aside for a large body and the crunch of leaves under hoof at the same time.

“Want to go for a hunt?” Heath asked, his excitement bleeding across the pack bond to me and infecting me with the primal urge to hunt.

In answer, I jumped to my paws and dashed down the slope toward the sound of a deer in the thicket below. Heath separated from me to circle around and cut off its chances for escape.

Compared to everything else I was dealing with, this felt easy. Simple. Primal.

My wolf took charge, and every action beyond that came by pure instinct. Together, we brought the deer down and then feasted on its carcass. The fresh meat made me feel alive, like all was right in the world.

At least, my wolf thought so. In the back of my wolf's mind, my all-too-human thoughts intruded.

Was Heath right about why Freya had rejected me? Did the disappointment I sensed in her come from a concern that I'd ruined her chances with Flint?

Part of me feared that if I gave her permission to be with others, she wouldn't come back to me. But a wiser part of me knew that if I tried to keep her to myself, she'd never be mine.

By the time the sun came up, I knew what I had to do.

"Heath... Are you still interested in Freya, even though she wears my mark?" I asked as we rinsed off in the icy river.

"Of course," he answered without hesitation.

"Do you think Flint feels the same way?"

Heath chuffed, his wolf's breath coming out as mist in the cold morning air. *"You said they were cuddling in bed together, didn't you? That he even kissed your mate mark on her? I'd say you have your answer."*

"Right."

We loped back toward town, and I felt Freya stirring, coming awake alongside Flint in bed. I examined my feelings. Knowing they'd spooned all night long didn't bother me in the slightest. Flint and Heath... I trusted them with her. My wolf felt content when she was with them. Yet if any other wolf shifter so much as looked at her the wrong way, I'd skin him alive.

“You going back to the den to get some sleep?” Heath asked. *“I can cover for you for a few hours until Flint can take over.”*

I remembered what day it was, and all the things I needed to do to make sure Frost Fang recovered from years under Nira’s toxic rule. Heath needed rest as much as I did, and he’d already had his turn dealing with the drudgery last night.

I needed to apologize to Freya for doing all the things she’d said — biting her without asking first, giving her an unequal mating, taking away her privacy, all of it — but maybe it was still too soon. Maybe she needed some space.

Maybe she needed to know that being with me didn’t mean giving up the others.

“No. I’ll go to the throne room,” I answered heavily. *“But there is something you can do for me instead.”*

“Whatever you need,” Heath answered, and something in my heart warmed at my best friend’s devotion.

He’d always been there for me, and he always would be.

“Go to Flint and Freya. Tell them my mate can be with any Howling Echo wolf she wants. Maybe that will prove to Freya that I have no intention of keeping her from the rest of you.”

“You’ll feel it through the mate bond,” Heath warned.

“I know. But I need to make this right somehow. I don’t want to lose her on the next full moon.”

Chapter 32

Freya

Flint closed the bedroom door behind himself. When he stepped toward me, I turned away, too afraid to see his reaction. He could probably smell Gage's scent all over me. I'd never felt more naked in front of him, yet he set the clothes aside and strode across the room to me.

“Gage bit you. How do you feel?”

Flint grabbed my naked hips and pulled me against him, squeezing me tight to his clothed body. Our long hair mingled together between us, and I stared up at him in shock.

He was touching the naked body of his pack alpha's mate. That was more than enough to get him executed in any other pack.

“Flint, I'm so sorry,” I whispered, tears filling my eyes.

I knew it was impossible to force a mate bond — Gage was right. Since that was true, then on some level, I really had chosen this. I had betrayed Flint.

“There is nothing to be sorry for, moonbeam. Unless you've decided Gage is your one and only.”

His hands didn't stray from my lower back, as if he already knew the answer.

“What? No, I'm... he *bit* me, Flint. Your pack alpha claimed me.”

After Flint had said I could be with all three of them if I wanted to, I'd examined my feelings and realized I cared about them all. Flint had won me over from the very beginning, and

lately I'd been falling for Gage, too. Things between Heath and I were confused, but... I longed to explore that connection, as well. Somewhere along the way, I'd stopped wanting to belong to one man alone.

But now Gage had marked me as his.

I tried to push away from Flint, but his iron grip tightened around me.

“And?”

“He’s keeping us apart!” I cried, tears falling freely now. “He admitted he ordered you away while we were...”

“While you were...”

Flint’s eyebrows raised as if daring me to fill in the blank, and a ghost of a smile lit his expression.

“Enjoying yourselves.” He stated it as fact, not a question.

“I didn’t want him to bite me!”

“Because you’re afraid you can’t be with me?”

“That, and... other reasons.”

But as I stared up into Flint’s dark gaze, I couldn’t remember what those reasons were at the moment. All I knew was that I wanted this amazing man right in front of me, and now I couldn’t have him. What we’d shared was over now.

“Freya... you’re different. We don’t know what that means yet, but I promise I’ll be by your side as we figure it out.”

“What?”

“You’re half-wolf, half-witch. And your wolf... differs from most.” He traced the mark on my collarbone with his knuckle. “When witches claim their mates, they often have a cluster or a line of multiple bonded marks on their bodies. Showing the world their relationships are unbreakable.”

“A cluster? Of multiple marks?”

Flint nodded. “Polyamory is common among witches. Pair bonding is much less so.”

Hope rose within me, but I stifled it as best I could. My entire life, hope had misled me, repeatedly leading me to despair.

Seeming to sense I needed a moment to think about this, Flint let go of me. I drifted toward the shower in a daze, and he kept me company while I rinsed off.

Flint was basically telling me this changed nothing, and hope — my longtime nemesis — tried to rise within me. I squashed it down as best I could. Maybe if we'd discussed it all beforehand... But this felt too much like all the other times I'd hoped for a better future, only to have it ripped away from me by circumstance. Still...

“My mother had three mates,” I remembered, considering what it meant.

“She did,” Flint acknowledged. “And I believe you will have multiple mates as well.”

He ran his fingertips over Gage's mark, making me shiver with remembered pleasure. Then Flint toweled me off.

“But how, when Gage's wolf already marked me as his? He's the pack alpha, Flint. Why would he share his mate?”

Flint being so calm was helping me calm down, too. I took a deep breath, trying to let go of the despair that had been near suffocating me for the last ten minutes. My emotions were all over the place, I knew that. I'd been through a lot in the past three weeks, even if — or maybe because — I'd been unconscious for two of them. Surely my body chemistry was all over the place. And then Gage had bitten me out of nowhere.

I may have come to the worst possible conclusion, but I still didn't think I'd overreacted about the bite. I had every right to be pissed that he'd marked my body and claimed me without my consent.

“We'll figure it out,” Flint assured me as I dressed in the clothes he'd brought me.

“Where did these clothes come from?” I asked. “Frost Fang?”

“What’s theirs is yours,” he said with a satisfied grin.

I frowned. “Because they think I’m mated to their new pack alpha?”

“Because the Howling Echo pack now rules Frost Fang.” I’d never seen such a malicious glint to Flint’s eyes. “We outrank everyone, by Gage’s decree. That includes you, too.”

I scoffed as the shirt settled around my shoulders and I pulled my hair free behind it. “Everyone will sense I’m no alpha.”

When I came back into the bedroom, I noticed a tray of food arranged on the dresser at the bedside.

“Though I could get used to this,” I admitted.

Flint laughed. “Let’s get you tucked in.”

Once I was in bed, he brought the tray to me, and I scarfed down more than I expected. It seemed my body craved fuel now that I was healing properly.

When I was done, Flint took the tray away and got under the covers with me. Without asking, he pulled my pajama-clad body against his, spooning me. It was times like these that I remembered Flint was every bit an alpha, like his packmates — my packmates. Flint might be a kinder, more compassionate alpha, but he still took what he wanted... when he knew I wanted it, too.

Unlike that asshole, Gage. Or Heath, for that matter.

“I don’t want to leave this house,” I sighed in his arms. “I don’t want to face Frost Fang with Gage’s bite mark on me.”

“To them, your word is law,” Flint whispered in my ear, squeezing my back to his chest. “You set your limits, and they’ll obey.”

I sighed. “I didn’t ask for any of this.”

When I burrowed down into the blankets, the loose neck of my pajama shirt gaped open. Before I could self-consciously adjust it, Flint leaned over and kissed the spot where my shoulder met my neck.

Pleasure instantly jolted me. I shivered as Flint's lips gently withdrew from the place our pack alpha had marked me. Heat pooled between my thighs, and I wondered how good it would feel if Flint continued touching the mark... and whether that asshole Gage could feel it.

"None of us did," Flint murmured, drawing me back to the here and now. "But we'll get through it. Together."

Feeling more at ease, I let myself relax into Flint's embrace. As I drifted toward sleep, I realized he was right. Flint and Heath had been dragged along when Gage killed Nira and became the Frost Fang pack alpha. They were just as trapped as me.

I tried to imagine how weird it would have been if he'd conquered Ironwood instead, and I had to confront all my old bullies. Then I suddenly understood the glint in my cuddly alpha's eyes. Maybe Flint felt similarly about the wolves that had cast him out.

It reminded me that Flint was only sweet and cuddly with me — I'd seen him kill before, multiple times. He was a deadly, dangerous alpha in his own right. And clearly, he shared no love for Frost Fang.

Suddenly, I longed to be by Flint's side as he navigated this confusing situation we found ourselves in. I wanted to be there for him when he confronted his old friends and foes. I wanted him to lean on me the way I leaned on him.

I could only hope I'd be able to be there for Flint that way I wanted to... that Gage would let me. My wolf's bared her teeth at the thought. She would not be kept from her mates, even by another mate.

When I'd almost drifted off to sleep, my subconscious startled me awake with a sudden revelation. They had cast Flint out because of his sister.

"Flint, is your sister still in the Frost Fang pack?" I asked.

"What?"

Only then did I realize his breathing had grown deep and steady behind me. He'd been asleep. But some part of him had

heard me.

“Yes. Fern lives in a distant town. The entire town is scheduled to arrive in a few days to swear allegiance to Gage and admit any treachery.” He squeezed me tight again. “I can’t wait to introduce you two.”

The thought of meeting Flint’s sister strangely comforted me. He wanted me to know his family, like mates should.

If Flint was right, Gage’s bite wasn’t the end for us. Maybe I could still be with Flint and sort things out with Heath thanks to my witch half, if that’s what those rune marks indicated.

Yet until I was sure, being in bed with another man felt wrong.

Reassurances poured down the pack bond to me, startling me for a moment. Then I realized... Gage knew. The unequal mate bond allowed him to sense that I was in bed with another man. And yet, he was comforting me?

As the pack bond filled with his warm reassurances, I slowly relaxed. My mate knew I was with Flint, and he was okay with it. That’s what Gage was telling me. He wasn’t mad.

It made me feel cared for in a way I’d never experienced. Despite the fight we’d just had, Gage wasn’t trying to punish me — instead, he took the time to reassure me. Unlike the alphas in Ironwood, he didn’t beat me or revoke any privileges. He’d left me to cool down in the care of someone I trusted and monitored me from afar to make sure I was okay.

I didn’t know how to reconcile that with the alpha who bit me without permission.

With Gage’s comforting presence in the back of my mind, I drifted off to sleep in Flint’s arms. I slept the whole night through and awakened in Flint’s warm embrace. It was the first time I could remember him sleeping through the entire night with me.

As I stretched and yawned, Flint smiled at me. He possessively ran his hand down my chest, to my hip, and to my thigh. “Sleep well, moonbeam?”

“Yes, since you stayed the whole time.”

He grinned. “Perks of having a bigger pack. We have other people to stand watch now.”

“People you trust?”

Flint nodded. “Although most didn’t care one way or the other about our various banishments, not everyone agreed with the previous pack alphas’ decisions. And we’ve used our alpha command to force the truth from each wolf, one by one.”

“That sounds exhausting.”

Flint’s smile faltered. “It is. But it’s worth it to know who we can trust. Gage has already exiled over a dozen wolves.”

I rolled over and pulled the pillow onto my head. “It’s too early to talk about pack politics.”

Flint’s muffled laugh reached my ears, but his hands drifted down, caressing my arm through the fabric, and then sliding down to my hip. There, his fingers teased along the hem of my shirt before sliding beneath it.

My body instantly heated with desire, but I couldn’t override decades of cultural conditioning that Gage was now my mate. No matter how angry I was with him, I wouldn’t violate our mating bond like that. There would be no sexy fun times until we figured out where things stood now.

I rolled over, putting my head on the pillow, and Flint’s fingers paused near my belly button when he saw my expression.

My lips parted, and I was just about to apologize when his head tilted as though he’d heard something.

Through the mate bond, Gage had sensed we were in bed together. If he’d also sensed my arousal just now... My heart raced despite myself.

Flint’s gaze sharpened as he glanced toward the bedroom door, the room’s only entrance. We both froze as the doorknob turned.

Chapter 33

Freya

Flint and I both tensed when the bedroom door opened. I braced myself to face Gage.

Instead, Heath appeared, wearing nothing but low-slung jeans. He was barefoot, and I noticed a leaf in his hair. He must have just returned from a run.

“It’s good to hear you two having fun,” Heath smiled.

My pulse slowed down and weariness descended, though I’d just awakened. Now I had to deal with Heath’s reaction to Gage’s mark on my body.

Heath paused at the threshold, his hand still on the doorknob. Hesitation filled his eyes, and his smile slowly fell when I yawned.

“Did you run with Gage?” Flint asked.

Heath nodded. “He’s an idiot.”

My jaw fell open. Heath and Gage always seemed to be on the same side. I quickly sat up in the bed, regarding Heath a little more closely. As he prowled toward the bed, every line of his body screamed ‘predator.’

I froze, at war with my instincts. My sense of survival, attuned to Ironwood for over twenty years, told me not to draw the dangerous alpha’s attention, while my wolf came to life at the word ‘run’ — she was feeling playful and wanted to make him chase us as he’d done once before. And, as a woman who appreciated sexy, shirtless men, I couldn’t deny that heat surged through me as I watched him approach.

Heath had just apologized and asked for a second chance, but that was before Gage claimed me. I could only hope that Flint was right about everything, otherwise I'd missed my one chance with the playful but confusing alpha.

Just like at the start of my heat, Heath perched at the foot of the bed, far from me and Flint, as if he didn't want to intrude, but couldn't help but come closer.

"He told me you rejected him," Heath said. "Which means he must have done something truly stupid."

I narrowed my eyes, searching his face. Was this some kind of trick? Was he going to report back what I said to Gage?

No matter. I'd already told Gage how pissed I was, and he could feel it through the mate bond. Nothing I said to Heath should surprise Gage.

"He bit me without asking," I growled.

Heath nodded. "Like I said, he's an idiot." He laid a hand on the bed between us. "But he does care about you, Freya. And he sent me here with a message."

Flint snorted, but my eyes didn't leave Heath's face. He looked... uncertain. And he didn't meet my gaze when he delivered the pack alpha's message for his mate.

"Gage says he has no intention of making you his alone. He wants you to know that you can be with any Howling Echo wolf you want."

The gasp tore from my lips, and my heart clenched with a confusing mix of emotions. Gratitude toward Gage, then anger at feeling grateful for something that was always my choice to begin with. Gratitude toward Heath for bringing me this reassurance, then anxiety about his intentions and expectations. And overwhelming joy at the thought that I could explore whether Flint was right. That I might be able to claim him as my mate as well.

I reached toward Flint, pulling him toward me. Our lips met in a searing kiss, and I lost all track of the outside world.

He pulled me away from the pillows, and our lips parted when he pulled my shirt over my head.

My body ignited in pure desire for him. But that desire skyrocketed when I felt the dip of the bed behind me. Four hands began caressing my naked skin, and I glanced over my shoulder at Heath, his own shirtless body on display.

The hesitation in his eyes strangely made my fears fall away.

“I can leave you two alone if—”

I twisted toward Heath before he could finish his sentence and pulled his broad shoulders down. He flowed with my movements, and his mouth met mine in a hungry kiss — our first ever.

As my lips opened for him, he groaned into my mouth and our tongues danced together. I ran my hands all over his sexy upper body, giving myself permission to slide my hands up his sculpted back and lean into the kiss, to squeeze those hard shoulders, and then to caress his rock-solid pecs.

I wanted him to know I wanted this. I wanted him. And his kiss told me the same. He’d been holding back this entire time, but now... Now, when I was so confused about Gage and everything, Heath was here to show me the way.

When he pulled back, his eyes burned with desire, and his hands dropped to the button of his jeans.

“Stop me now if—”

“No,” I breathed. “Let’s keep going.”

Flint chuckled as he pulled me back against him, his hands teasing my nipples in spite of my hair getting in the way. His lips tickled the shell of my ear. “Heath is hungry for you, moonbeam.”

“I want you both.”

I raised my arms to tangle my hands in Flint’s hair as Heath stood up from the bed to remove his jeans. He stroked himself for me, his eyes burning with desire as he watched Flint pinching my nipples. My mind went back to that time at

Dark Potion, when Heath and Flint had driven me wild in the restaurant while Gage watched.

In the back of my mind, I knew Gage would sense all of this. That was the point of one-sided mate bonds... the dominant male wolf could monitor his mate and ensure she didn't dally with other wolves, or plot to escape his control, all while he could do as he pleased without his mate's knowledge.

I intended to test Gage's resolve — a sliver of me hoped he felt every second of my pleasure... and that it pissed him off. Meanwhile, I was going to thoroughly enjoy myself.

Suddenly, I could feel Gage sending me his support and reassurance through the pack bond again — telling me he wanted this for me. Even though he would sense all of it.

I might have forgiven him a little in that moment. Gage had sent Heath here as a peace offering to prove his intentions. I was happy to accept it... and I was thankful he wasn't intending to derail the course that he himself had set from the beginning.

“Stay with us, little wolf,” Heath's powerful voice demanded my attention. As he stalked closer, I realized I'd gotten too lost in my head.

I laid back so I could lift my hips and take my pajama bottoms off, leaving myself naked for both of them to see. Part of me felt weird about it, knowing how much my body had changed in the last fifteen days. But the two sets of eyes that raked over me were filled with ravenous desire, making me feel like a goddess on display, theirs for the taking.

“Gorgeous,” Heath whispered just as Flint said, “Beautiful.”

Together, they set about erasing all my worries about Gage. Flint pulled away to remove his clothes, and Heath slid up next to me on the bed, worshiping me with his hands. He dipped his head to my breasts, and I arched into the heat of his breath. Taking the hint, he swirled each nipple in his mouth.

Then his hand drifted down between my thighs.

“Spread them for us,” Heath ordered.

That was one alpha command I was happy to obey. I felt so wanton with the realization that this was actually happening... that I was about to do this with two alphas who weren't my bonded mate.

I turned my head to watch Flint getting naked, his long, dark hair covering his pecs as he straightened, putting his delicious abs on display for me. My eyes traveled downward to his perfect V and then to his mouth-watering dick.

"Can I taste you?" I asked him.

"Anything for you, moonbeam," he answered, moving toward the bed.

Heath echoed me with a twinkle in his eye, "And can I taste *you*?"

"Yes, please," I moaned as his lips trailed down to my hip bone.

With both men intent on me, the specialness of this moment struck me. My heat had ended, and I knew Flint and Heath were choosing to be with me because they wanted to be. Not to relieve some biological need. And there was no full moon right now to stir our passions. Just our own desires. I no longer questioned my urge to be with all three of them. I wanted them all, heat or no heat.

They wanted me, and I was done holding myself back. I laid back, spreading my thighs to accommodate Heath's powerful body. His breath teased me, and I couldn't wait to feel him devouring me.

So claim them all, my wolf urged.

Come out so I can, I growled internally at her.

As Heath settled between my legs, Flint surprised me by straddling my shoulders, his dick bobbing in my face. With one hand, he guided it down to my mouth.

"Open up, moonbeam."

I smiled up at him and parted my lips. He slowly slid his cock into my mouth, and I circled it with my lips while savoring the look of awe in his eyes far above me.

But everything changed when I felt Heath's tongue part my folds below. His hands came up to my thighs, pushing them open to give him greater access, and I moaned around Flint's cock.

His lust-darkened eyes locked on mine, Flint tilted his hips, pushing deeper into my mouth as Heath plunged his tongue into me. It was so hot, not being able to see what Heath was doing because Flint blocked my view.

Flint's long, dark hair danced in front of him as he leaned over me, supporting himself against the headboard. Feeling out my limits, he slowly rocked his hips, and I feasted on the sight of his abs rolling with every thrust. My hands clutched at his ass, urging him forward and pulling him deeper.

I devoured him, reveling in the sheer pleasure on his face above me. Freeing a hand from the headboard, he reached down to adjust the angle, nudging his cock to touch the back of my throat. When I relaxed my throat, he eased himself deeper yet, speeding up his thrusts when he was sure I could handle it. Grasping his hips, I helped guide the pace, urging him faster when I could tell he was holding back.

Heath, wanting to steal my attention for himself, went to town with his lips, tongue, and even his teeth, driving a loud, surprised moan from me — which in turn had Flint gasping from the vibrations.

Seeing Flint chasing his pleasure above me, taking my mouth with his hand on his cock, stuffing it in as deep as he pleased... all while simultaneously feeling Heath's mouth on me, but being unable to brace for what came next because I couldn't see it... Within moments, the two of them brought me to the edge.

It was so good, and my climax kicked off the moment Heath's fingers pierced my wet heat. His tongue slid insistently over my sweet spot as his fingers curved up perfectly inside of me. I screamed around Flint's cock, and within seconds, he was spilling into my mouth. I managed to swallow every drop even in the midst of my orgasm. When he

was finished, he dismounted with a smile, sliding over to kneel beside the bed.

I reached for Heath, but he refused to come up for air, driving me straight into a second orgasm. When my back arched, Flint's hand came down between my breasts, pushing me back down and pinning me to the bed. Then he leaned over, tormenting in turn each of my nipples with his tongue as his silky hair swept over my torso — still holding me in place as I rode out wave after wave of my climax.

Heath grinned and sat up, wiping my juices from his lips. "Gage hasn't torn down the door yet. That's a good sign."

"Let's see if he can handle a little more, then," I panted, trying to catch my breath, but feeling the ache of being empty.

"A little more?" Heath teased with a gleam in his eye, hefting his thick cock for my perusal. "I'd say this is a lot more."

"Yes," I groaned. "Give it to me."

Heath laughed. "Still so greedy."

Flint joined me on the bed, his hands languidly skating from my breasts down to my hips before his fingers edged toward my center. He teased my oversensitive clit, his fingers unerringly steady as my hips bucked reflexively in response. It was almost too much, but like Heath had said, I was still feeling greedy enough to want more.

Heath drank in the sight before settling between my thighs. He gazed down at me for a moment, as though waiting for me to deny him. But I reached up toward him, and he settled over me, his crown kissing my entrance.

"Yes, please," I groaned. "I want you inside of me, Heath."

His warm voice tantalized me. "I thought you'd never ask."

Then he took me in one long, smooth stroke, filling me up so perfectly. The stretch was magnificent, and I nearly came again on the spot.

Arms bracketed on either side of me, I was surrounded by Heath's powerful arms and abs as he effortlessly thrust in and out of me. Our eyes locked, we lost ourselves in the mindless pleasure of moving together until his large hand cupped my head.

He bent my gaze downward roughly ordered, "Watch."

I looked down to see his cock between my thighs, sliding deep inside of me. The sensation and the view made me groan with desire. Then he slowly withdrew, and seeing my wetness covering his hard length drove me closer and closer to the edge.

Just as he had at the restaurant, Heath glanced over at Flint and asked, "Get her clit for me, would you?"

Flint chuckled and slid his hand between me and Heath without hesitation, surprising me. He didn't seem to care that Heath's cock was right there, sliding in and out of me, as Flint's fingers danced over my clit.

I groaned with need, chasing another orgasm. My whole body tensed, and I felt my legs start to tremble.

"Fuck that's hot," Flint growled into my ear as his fingers continued teasing me. "Let's make her come."

"Shall we drive Gage wild, *princess*?" Heath winked down at me, using Gage's nickname for me.

All I could do was moan, "Yesssss."

Heath came down on his forearms, adjusting the angle of his thrusts and grinding Flint's hand against my clit. All I could do was brace myself, hips curved to meet him, as he slammed into me. With his mouth hovering over mine, our breathless sounds — moans, gasps, cries — blended together as his relentless thrusts continued.

Even though every thrust pressed Heath's body into his hand, Flint didn't stop. Knowing exactly what I liked and what I needed, his fingers moved faster and faster as Heath's speed picked up.

"Yes, Heath," I cried. "Yes, Flint. Please, please..."

“Please, what?” Heath asked.

“Please let me come,” I groaned.

“Oh, we won’t *let* you come,” Heath slammed into me again. “We’re going to *make* you come.”

Together, they drove me inexorably to the edge, and then pushed me right over it. My hands clutched the blankets on one side and Flint’s shoulder on the other. My back arched as my hips tilted, trying to take as much of Heath as I could get. All the while, Flint’s fingers made me see stars.

When I came back to earth, the two of them had moved me into the middle and settled in on either side of me. I turned first to Flint, then to Heath, searching their faces but finding no runes there.

“Why?” I whispered, my heart falling.

Were all of my fears coming true? Did Gage’s mark make it impossible for the others and I to become true mates?

Heath grabbed my hand and brought it to his lips, kissing it and silently consoling me.

Flint kissed along my collarbone where my rune stubbornly stood alone, without the cluster of other runes he had promised. “We’ll figure it out, Freya.”

Heath winked. “And until then, we’re happy to keep trying.”

His playful grin brought a smile to my lips as well.

Maybe we didn’t have all the answers yet. But I believed in the Howling Echo. We were stronger together, and I was going to trust my packmates — for the first time in my life. Even an inconvenient mate mark wouldn’t come between us.

Chapter 34

Gage

I decided to give Freya an entire day to come to terms with everything that had happened. It was the longest day of my life.

I did my best to keep myself distracted with pack politics while Flint and Heath made my mate see stars. I'd given her all the reassurance I could before locking down the pack bond so I didn't broadcast my roiling emotions.

Jealousy had me clenching my fists while sitting on my brother's throne. Focusing on all the new issues the Frost Fang pack kept laying at my feet proved difficult, but necessary.

Heath and Flint wisely limited my perception of the two of them through the pack bond, knowing the mate bond itself would be driving me insane. I expected my wolf to want to tear off Heath and Flint's heads, but no. My wolf felt perfectly content the entire time. I could feel every spike of Freya's euphoria, every peak of ecstasy, every wild orgasm. And my wolf drank in every moment of it, as pleased as if he'd delivered that pleasure himself.

How the witches handled so many mate bonds, I didn't know. Maybe their mate bonds weren't as strong as a wolf's bite, because this was distracting as hell. And it was awkward as fuck having a jealous boner while subordinate wolves prattled on about their problems.

As Freya's pleasure ratcheted up again, I interrupted the wolf kneeling below me with a gasp. "Clear the room. We'll reconvene to discuss this matter in an hour's time."

Without waiting for a response, I dashed from the throne room. Then I slipped into a private bathroom, hoping to handle my business.

Freya's third orgasm left me weak in the knees. I unbuttoned my pants, ready to take myself in hand and paint the walls... until her euphoria quickly turned to disappointment. Why?

My wolf jumped to his paws in an instant, pacing around inside my mind, concerned by his mate's distress. It killed my boner and made me want to rush over to our den and find out what was the matter. But I knew that was probably the last thing that would soothe Freya right then.

She'd already yelled at me for taking away her privacy. If I came running now, I'd risk smothering her. Besides, I knew Heath and Flint were there. They could reassure her and tell me what was going on later.

Freya acted like the mate bond let me read her mind. If anything, the bond made her even more of a puzzle to me. My inner turmoil left me pacing the halls, unwilling to return to my duties in such a state. A few minutes later, Flint showed up. He'd showered, washing away Freya's scent.

"You okay?" he asked when he turned the corner and found me in an empty hallway.

"Not yet," I answered. "But I will be. As soon as Freya and I figure things out."

Flint crossed his arms, staring at me. "Heath told us you sent him there. What did you sense through the mate bond?"

"Everything," I admitted. "I hope this proves to her—"

My words died when Flint stalked forward, an angry expression on his face.

"You'll need to do a lot more than that to prove yourself to her. If you thought that counted as your apology, you're sorely mistaken. Heath and I are not going to fix this for you."

I held up my hands in surrender. "I know. I had to start somewhere. We can keep sharing like before. I wanted her to

know that.”

Flint didn't look placated at all. If anything, I'd riled him up even more.

“What?”

“You think that's up for you to decide?” He shook his head in disappointment and started to walk off, but stopped when I called out to him.

“I need you to check on the northern wolves. They didn't show up to swear their allegiance like expected this morning, and I want to know if it's insurrection or something else.”

A slight nod over his shoulder his only reply before he headed outside. By the time I returned to the throne room, I felt itchy and irritated. But there was a lot to do, so I did it.

Eventually Heath came to relieve me. He was scheduled to question another set of wolves who'd come to swear their allegiance. By that time, I'd been treated to a whole host of Freya's emotions.

As soon as Heath showed up, I cleared the throne room again so he and I could catch up.

“I caught Freya up on all the latest news,” he said as he approached the throne. “Including the fact that you're an idiot.”

I snorted. “Great.”

He clapped me on the shoulder. “Glad to see you survived the mate bond. We gave it our best.”

I growled. “Were you intentionally—”

“Punishing you? Yes.” Heath's flirty words, combined with the playful spark in his eyes, sent a jolt of lust straight through me.

It was just a memory of the last time I'd 'punished' Freya. Or perhaps a sense of déjà vu from Dark Potion as I watched Flint and Heath force her to come while I watched. Nothing to do with Heath specifically, I felt sure.

So, why did my thoughts instantly go back to Heath's words last night? *I love you, Gage, but you're a real idiot sometimes.*

He meant that he loved me like a brother, right? We'd always been close but...

Heath laughed at the look on my face and came to sit right next to me on the arm of the throne, towering over me.

"You're thinking really hard. Don't hurt yourself."

Unlike Flint, Heath still carried Freya's scent. My dick instantly took notice, and I reminded it not to get excited, because Freya was nowhere nearby. And likely wouldn't welcome my attentions even if she was.

"And I guess you couldn't be bothered to shower either."

"All part of your punishment."

In spite of my reminder, my dick hardened even more at that word. To take out my frustration, I shoved Heath off the throne. He laughed as he recovered, landing on both feet.

"Seriously, though, how is she?" I asked.

"Now we're getting somewhere." Heath crossed his arms, all traces of playfulness gone.

I sighed. "I just wish she could accept my bite as a gift. I didn't mean—"

"As a gift?" I'd never heard Heath's voice go that high in incredulity before. "You'll be lucky to win Freya's forgiveness. Here's a tip: Don't go talk to her until you get your head out of your ass."

My first instinct was to lash out in anger, but my wolf whimpered. That cued me in, making me take a closer look at the situation. If I'd managed to piss off Heath, too, then yeah...

"I fucked up," I said out loud.

"Yup," Heath said.

I descended the throne, ready to leave this claustrophobic place. I needed to get outside. I needed to shed my clothes and

run. I needed my wolf to take charge for a while, to make things less complicated.

“What does your wolf think?” Heath asked.

“He wants to run,” I answered instantly, then listened a little closer. “He... wasn’t upset when you two were with her. In fact, he was totally calm. He wasn’t worried about dealing with a raging boner.”

Heath laughed, and the sound soothed my jagged edges and gave me hope that everything might work out.

“But he was concerned when Freya felt disappointed afterward.”

“She doesn’t understand why her mark didn’t appear on either of us.”

“Did you bite her to see if that would work?”

“Gage,” Heath groaned in frustration. “You really think she wants *another* bite right now? And what if it doesn’t work? She’ll be crushed.”

“Right...” I faced him with renewed resolve. “Sleep deprivation isn’t helping. I need to catch up on sleep tonight. Will you take care of things?”

“You know I will.”

“Thank you,” I said sincerely. “I probably don’t say that enough, but... I couldn’t do any of this without you.”

Heath sat on the throne and winked. “Damn right. Now go run, then get some sleep. You can figure things out tomorrow when you have a clear head. I’ll keep your chair warm until then.”

“Don’t get too comfortable in that throne,” I said, but left to do just that.

As I ran alone through the woods, I sensed Frost Fang wolves giving me space. They knew not to call upon their pack alpha outside of the throne room — that had been hammered home by Nira, Garth, and my father.

I still had a lot to do if I had any hopes of remaking Frost Fang to be more like the Howling Echo. This pack had lost faith in the hierarchy after so many selfish pack alphas, and as a result they didn't trust me or each other. They needed time to heal, to see that things could be different, and better.

The situation with Freya felt similar. Both cases would take time. I hadn't even realized how lucky I was to earn Freya's trust... until my stupid mistake broke that fragile trust. Some part of me really had been treating her like we still had the deal, and I could do whatever I wanted to her.

That wasn't how I wanted my mate to feel. Seeing how horribly my father had treated his wives while I was growing up, I'd always wanted my mate to be my equal. But then Nira and Garth had twisted me up, and I'd sworn off mating at all. Then Flint had brought Freya to our pack. And now, I'd messed up everything by biting Freya and making a one-sided mate bond.

I hoped her wolf would appear soon so she could bite me back... if she didn't reject me under the full moon first.

My paws instinctively took me back to the den. With my snout in the air, I circled the building, finding nothing out of place. My mate was safe, and that pleased my wolf, though he longed to see and sniff her for himself.

I wanted to see her, to talk to her, to explain. But not while I was this sleep-deprived. After what I'd blurted to Heath about them biting her, I knew I was liable to put my paw in my mouth if I talked to Freya right now. With the way things had gone so far, it would only guarantee that things got worse, not better. No, I needed to sleep first, think things through, and talk to her with a clear mind in the morning.

So instead, I went back to the old alpha estate. I'd cleared out my father's mates, exiling most of them for conspiring against Garth and me. Now the massive house sat abandoned and empty.

It felt strange to go inside. Things had changed... a few rooms were decorated almost the same. In one wing, I could see my brother's touch. And in other areas, Nira had taken

over completely. My wolf and I both bristled anytime we caught her scent, faint as it was. She apparently hadn't lived here for quite some time, for which I felt grateful.

I made my way back to my old room and caught the scent of other wolves here. Apparently they'd turned this into a guest room after I was exiled. I changed the sheets, stripped out of my clothes, and then gratefully sank into the bed.

It didn't feel like home, but maybe that was for the best. Everything had changed in Frost Fang while I was gone. And everything would need to change again. I punched the pillow a few times before I got comfortable. Knowing that Heath had people we could trust on watch put me at ease. Sleep would release me from the constant feel of Freya at the back of my mind, so I mentally bid her goodnight.

Tomorrow, we'll fix things, I promised to her and to my wolf.

Chapter 35

Freya

Gage's absence felt like a gaping hole in my mind all day. Not once did he return to visit. My heart ached at the thought that my tryst with Flint and Heath had wounded him. Without the mate bond on my side, I had no idea what he could feel through it.

That was when I realized I didn't *want* to be mad at Gage. His peace offering had gone a long way toward making me feel better about the situation.

For the first time, I wondered if he really hadn't meant to bite me. The thought both filled me with warmth and pleased my wolf. The thought of making him lose control had pumped up my ego when he came before I did. But had I pushed him to lose control of his wolf as well? Had Gage been so overcome in the moment that I'd broken his resolve completely?

The thought that I could have such power over the pack alpha filled me with satisfaction. My wolf loved the knowledge that he'd wanted me so much that he couldn't help but claim me, leaving his physical mark for all to see.

I ventured out of the bedroom to explore the rest of our new den, a big, five-bedroom house. It didn't feel like an alpha residence, but maybe that was the point.

Either Heath or Flint stayed by my side the entire day, tag teaming in and out of our den.

"Do you think Gage is mad at me?" I asked Flint when we had dinner alone that night.

“No,” Flint squeezed my knee under the big, six-person table. “He’s just busy.”

“Too busy to visit his mate?”

“Freya...” Flint pushed his food around on his plate for a moment before answering me. “He’s giving you space so that you come to terms with your new place in the pack.”

“I already told him—”

“I know,” Flint answered. Then he smiled. “Trust me, I heard the whole thing.”

I sighed. “Then why didn’t you come in?”

“By the time I realized he’d bitten you, it was too late. And after that, I foolishly hoped the two of you could talk it out.”

I sighed. “Maybe now we can.”

“I hope so. But for now, the best thing you can do is to eat, sleep, and finish healing.” Flint’s powerful gaze pinned me in place. “None of us expected to end up ruling Frost Fang. This is an adjustment for all of us. Your pack needs you.”

I shook my head. “We’re not the alpha pair.”

“We don’t care about that, Freya. But it’s the Howling Echo pack who needs you. You’re important. To all of us.”

“And you really think my witch side will let me claim all of you as mates?” I asked, needing to hear it again.

“Not only your witch side.” Flint sliced off a chunk of meat. “Your wolf as well. When she graces us with her arrival.”

“Then I guess we won’t know until my birthday — whenever that actually is,” I said glumly.

“I believe in you and your wolf. You just need to trust her.”

“How can you be so sure?” I took another bite, because Flint was right — I wasn’t done healing.

“I dreamed of your wolf,” Flint admitted.

That was a sweet thought, but not enough to convince me. Still, I asked, “What did she look like?”

I'd never told anyone what I saw in my mind's eye when I imagined the wolf inside of me.

"She was beautiful. Majestic. Snow blue, like your eyes."

My sharp intake of breath gave me pause. In my mind, she was as white as the moon, but sometimes, in shadow... her undercoat gave her a light blue look, like freshly fallen snow. It was an eerie sight, especially paired with my blue eyes, which were the same in both forms.

"And my wolf's eyes?" I asked. "Did you see them?"

My throat closed when I thought back to what Ingrid had told me about my family, how their eyes never turned golden.

"As blue as they are right now."

He got it right once again. Flint had once told me there was power in dreams, and his eyes shone with more belief than I possessed. Maybe it wasn't much of a stretch for his subconscious to imagine my wolf's coat as pale as my hair, and with the same eyes I possessed as a human.

"Dreams are sacred, filled with secret meanings that each of us must unravel."

He gave me a meaningful look, and I remembered my own mysterious dreams of late.

"During my heat... I dreamed of a dark wolf. A wolf shifter. I've heard you all talk about another packmate."

Flint nodded. "You know his name."

"Rowan," I whispered, as though by saying his name I might summon the intimidating wolf from my dream.

"He'll return to us soon," Flint said. "Heath called him back now that things have changed."

"I'm looking forward to meeting him," I said, hiding my shiver of anticipation.

Part of me worried about what their former packmate — someone they trusted more than anyone else in the world — would think of their new situation. The pack alpha claiming a

mate, yet also giving his mate permission to be with others. Did Gage's edict extend to this mysterious wolf as well?

I remembered all-too-well the dream I'd had about him as my heat began. Part of me wanted him, and I didn't even know him.

"Do you think it's because of my magic that I dreamed of someone I never met?"

"Perhaps," Flint said. "Or your magic interacting with the pack bond, more specifically."

"With my heat over, I want to find someone who can help me break the curse — Ironwood might still be coming after me." The situation with Frost Fang would probably complicate that plan — based on all the bustling around, I got the impression we wouldn't be leaving particularly soon.

"The Frost Fang pack has always had a contentious relationship with non-wolves," Flint sounded as disappointed as I felt. "You'll find no mentor here."

We finished eating and retired to bed not long after. Gage and Heath never returned to the house, but Flint didn't leave my side. He sensed I needed company, and he snuggled back into bed with me. My mind whirled with thoughts of wolves and witches as I settled in, and it took me awhile to fall asleep.

Burrowed in the bedding, even my half-blooded nose could pick up the lingering smell of sex. Maybe that's why Gage hadn't returned. Hard enough for him to accept what he'd sensed through the mate bond. Harder still to smell it with his own nose.

As I slept in my wise alpha's arms that night, I dreamed.

In my dream, I flew out of our den and found myself outside the house, floating above the Frost Fang pack. They gazed up at me with adoration in their eyes. Those in the back in wolf form howled, a victorious sound welcoming me to the pack. The two-legged ones in the front gazed up at me in unnerving silence.

When I began drifting toward the forest to leave them behind, they followed me, so I faced them once more.

“As your pack alpha’s mate, I command you to turn back,” I yelled down at them.

Reluctantly, they listened, and I flew over the forest, until I spotted a path below. A path I didn’t need to follow, because I could fly. Yet I followed it anyway.

Eventually, through some dream-sense, I knew I’d reached the edge of packlands to the east. Once there, I slowly floated down to settle in a clearing.

A woman waited for me, just as I’d expected, shrouded in shadows. The same woman with deep-blue eyes who’d appeared to me as I was recovering from Nira’s poisoned blade. She’d been so proud of me, but I couldn’t remember why. I tried to remember what she’d said to me in that earlier dream, but before I could, her voice reached me.

“I’m your last living relative, Freya. Your aunt,” the woman said without moving her lips.

Her deep-blue eyes silently pleaded for me to understand. I struggled to speak, but couldn’t seem to summon any words.

“Join me here so I can tell you about your parents.”

This time the words burst out of me. “Why not tell me now?”

“Because this is a dream, and you won’t believe me here.”

“But I can’t leave my pack,” I whispered.

“I am your family.” Though she didn’t speak aloud, her words filled with anger. “They don’t even know who you really are.”

I wanted to ask more, to ask for her name, to ask about my parents, to find out about my long-lost sister, but I felt myself being pulled back toward my body. My eyelids fluttered, and I drifted at the edge of sleep and awareness.

Chapter 36

Freya

Forcing my eyes open, I sat straight up in bed, but the world still felt dream-like to me. I groggily remembered dreaming about the woman who called herself my aunt and tried to remember anything specific, but doing so felt like an almost-remembered word on the tip of my tongue.

Flint smiled at me from the doorway, as though he'd been waiting for me to wake up. The early rays of dawn had only just begun to slant into the window, and he looked radiant in the morning light. I almost invited him back to bed to cuddle up with him, to seek comfort at his side, but something tugged at the back of my mind, urging me to get up. Some power, some magic.

If she really was my aunt, the woman from my dreams must be related to my father, the mage. Presumably his sister, probably a mage as well if she was lingering at the edges of wolf territory.

Perhaps our family's magic connected us, showing me her location because she was nearby. If I went to that clearing, would she be waiting for me there?

"Flint, I dreamed of my aunt! She's near here, she showed me where. Maybe she could teach me about my magic!"

At my excitement, he stretched and headed toward the front of the house. "I'll come with you to find her."

His voice sounded slightly odd to my ears, not quite his usual deep morning voice that sounded like he'd just rolled from bed. Then again, he had been up before me. I found a

feminine coat hanging near the door and snagged it as I twisted the door knob.

But my wolf whined, and a little voice at the back of my mind reminded me Frost Fang hadn't been our allies for long.

Yesterday, I'd noticed the box Gage had given me resting on a shelf in the kitchen. I took it down and pulled out Gage's gift to me. The handgun felt too heavy in my hand, the weight of responsibility pulling my arm down. Hopefully, I wouldn't have any reason to use it.

Flint's expression seemed vacant as I turned back to him, but maybe he was thinking about what I'd told him. Or maybe he was just as drowsy as I was this morning.

I tucked the gun into a satchel I found hanging on a hook near the door, looped it across my chest, and went outside. Flint followed without hesitation as I unerringly headed for the forest path.

Unlike my dream, I couldn't just float over the trees, and as we started down the path on foot, I sensed someone following us. My hand went to the flap of the satchel, my heart racing.

I whirled, and the pair of wolves behind me stopped dead in their tracks, their golden eyes fixed on me. I could tell from their size they weren't alphas, and I didn't recognize them. If I could shift, would I be connected to them through the pack bond?

At my side, Flint growled, but they ignored him, their golden gazes still trained on me. I kept my hand in the satchel, my fingers curling around the butt of the handgun.

"Were you waiting for us?" I asked them.

One of the wolves whined, and I took that as a yes.

"Leave us be," I growled, but they didn't budge.

I raised my free hand and instantly felt foolish for trying to shoo them off like dogs.

"Remember what I told you," Flint murmured.

His words came back to me, *“To them, your word is law. You set your limits, and they’ll obey.”*

Then I remembered my dream. I already knew what to do.

“As your pack alpha’s mate, I command you to turn back. Leave me alone.”

Both wolves whimpered, but when I backed down the trail, neither of them followed us. I hadn’t asked for Gage to share his power with me, but I would use it if I had to.

As I traveled along the path, I kept looking over my shoulder, but I sensed no one else. Still, I began to feel foolish. It didn’t seem likely anyone would be waiting for me at the clearing — it was only a dream.

Just like it was a dream to think I could stay with Gage and be with Flint and Heath. He’d been afraid that my mark on his face would undermine his authority as pack alpha. If the Frost Fang pack smelled his enforcers on me... Which would be worse in their eyes? Mating a half-witch, or allowing his packmates to have their way with his mate?

But if the woman in my dream really did wait for me in the clearing... maybe she could help me break the bond and erase the mark on his face. Gage had ordered me to figure out how to do that, after all. I flinched at the memory — I hadn’t wanted to be bit and claimed like that, but the thought of breaking our bond had my wolf whining in distress and my heart clenching with anxious sorrow.

The dream still clouded my head, making me foggy and sluggish. It made the forest feel surreal as we walked along the path, as if I were still dreaming, though I knew I was awake. I glanced over at Flint, only to find his gaze remained fixed on the path ahead.

When he noticed me staring at him, he gestured for me to go ahead of him on the narrowing path. His confidence in me — the fact that he would follow me on my quest even if it might turn out fruitless — filled me with gratitude. I could always rely on Flint.

In only a few more minutes, I burst free of the trees. I gasped when I saw a woman standing in the tall grasses ahead of me. Hope filled me at the thought of meeting my family.

The woman regarded me with deep blue eyes that seemed to glow with power in the morning light. She kept her short brown hair cropped close to her head in an effortless pixie cut. With a blue and gold sweater, black slacks, and chunky boots, her modern style disarmed me and left me off-balance all at once.

Much like Brielle, her appearance didn't scream 'mage.' Even without the knowledge from my dream, I might have guessed she was family from my witch half. Something in the shape of her face reminded me of my own.

Her lips curved up in a welcoming smile when I approached.

"I'm so glad to finally meet you, Freya," she said in an oddly scratchy voice.

"Same," I said. "But who are you?"

"I am Pandora. Your father, Preston, was my brother." Her smile fell when she used the past tense. "Come, walk with me."

"Pandora and Preston?" I wondered aloud. "I thought only wolves named their litters with the same first letter like that."

Pandora snorted. "Our parents —your late grandparents — had a ridiculous sense of humor, considering we weren't even twins. In fact, we were born a year apart."

I recalled Ingrid mentioning that mage offspring weren't born in litters like wolves, and since the two of them weren't twins, it was probably considered strange that their parents had named them like wolf pups.

Pandora started walking away — in the opposite direction I'd come from. I didn't want to go any farther from the den than we had to, but she had more answers about my past... I couldn't let them slip through my fingers now, not when I was so close. I could walk with her for a ways, then turn back.

When I glanced over my shoulder, I was reassured by Flint's calming smile. He would protect me no matter what happened. I had nothing to fear as long as he was here with me.

Suddenly I felt like a jerk for not introducing him.

"Pandora, I should also introduce you to Flint, one of my... packmates."

I'd almost said mates, but technically Gage was my only true mate... at least until we could figure out how I could take multiple mates like my mother had. Maybe Pandora would know something useful that could help.

"Of course, dear," Pandora said dismissively.

Flint and I exchanged a look, but he just shrugged.

When we reached a rocky outcropping in our way, Pandora began to circle back the way we'd come. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"My parents always had an unhealthy obsession with wolf shifters," she said, all traces of friendliness fading.

The disdainful way she said it showed how little regard she held for shifters. My stomach twisted into knots, wondering how she felt about me, her half-breed niece.

"It didn't bother them when Preston fell in love with a wolf shifter, even when they learned she was already mated to wolves. They still accepted her completely." Her lip pulled back in a disgusted snarl. "I never did."

Pandora obviously hadn't liked my mother, and that made me wonder why she'd come here. My senses were on high alert as we walked, but I wasn't ready to put my tail between my legs and run just yet. While she was in a talkative mood, I should get as much info from her as I could.

"I thought mages took multiple mates, too," I said, not understanding why she'd made it sound so bad that my mother already had two other mates.

"*Witches*," Pandora corrected, "normally all agree on who will become Bonded before the ceremony. We don't keep

picking up strays as we go.”

“Tell me about my father,” I begged.

“I told Preston not to fall for that mangy shifter, but he said he loved Lilith.”

I restrained my wolf, who urged me to snarl and snap just like she was doing. But even though my mother’s name fell from Pandora’s lips with a condescending tone, I still treasured hearing her name once more. Pandora and I walked side by side, as though she hadn’t just insulted my mother.

“My brother refused to see reason, even moving with her to these savage lands, away from the safety of the covens. He got himself cast out and became a mage for her, and for what?” she scoffed. “As far as I’m concerned, you and your mother are the reason he’s dead.”

“But I—”

Pandora glared at me as though I’d personally shit in her cereal.

“You’re no blood of mine.”

I shook my head. All this time I’d longed to find my family, and now that I finally had, she hated me. Which didn’t add up.

I stopped in my tracks. “Then why are you here?”

Pandora faced me fully, coming to a stop as well. The hairs stood on the back of my neck. Why did I feel like she had me right where she wanted me? My fingers twitched, itching to open the satchel, but I didn’t want to give anything away.

I glanced over my shoulder, but Flint stood impassively, as though unconcerned with anything Pandora had said. Didn’t he realize she might be a threat?

“I always wondered whether bottling up your magic would stifle its growth. But you’ve proven you can sense magic even though you can’t access it,” Pandora smiled triumphantly at me, “which makes it ripe for picking.”

She outstretched a glowing hand, and I flinched away, stumbling backward, my heart hammering. I twisted, reaching out to Flint. But the moment my hand found his, he shimmered and... disappeared. My hand passed through nothing, and I almost fell.

I gasped in shock as I recovered my footing. Flint hadn't followed me. I was alone.

"Pretty good illusion, right?" Pandora cackled like an actual villain.

I'd been so foolish to take my dream at face value... to send those wolves away. Wolves who were probably assigned to protect me in my mate's absence. That's why they hadn't reacted to Flint's growl... they hadn't even seen the illusion of him.

"This might hurt a little." Pandora's eyes lit up as though the thought thrilled her.

I snatched the handgun out of the satchel, raised it, and fired.

The bullet tore through my aunt's sternum and disappeared without a trace. Her expression remained fixed on me, unmoving. Unnaturally still... frozen.

Gage! I screamed inside my mind, hoping the bond would somehow carry my desperate thoughts to him. *I'm at the edge of packlands.*

Run, my own wolf answered.

The entire world rippled around me. I no longer stood in an inviting, open clearing. Illusions peeled away to reveal a sloping hill and dark crags all around us. My aunt stood a few feet away in a different direction, her expression furious. She'd fooled me with an illusion of herself.

"How dare you shoot at me, you ungrateful half-breed! I saved your life as a child!"

I whirled to face her, raising the gun in the hopes of actually hitting her this time.

Pandora's hands flew up, and pain arced into me, radiating from my stomach outward to my limbs. The gun clattered to the stones at my feet. Invisible magical needles lanced my lungs, stealing my breath away and making me bow before her in agony. All the blows I'd suffered, all the split lips, all the vicious kicks, all the broken bones... none of it compared to the pain I suffered at Pandora's hands.

"Denraider would've killed you. Those dogs don't care whether a witch is an adult or an infant. They're rabid, feral beasts. I spared you from that fate."

She said it as though she were merciful, even as her magic painfully wracked through me. I couldn't run or even form coherent thoughts.

The endless suffering of this eternal moment tortured me into a soundless scream. And something inside of me... began to come loose.

"Give me your magic," she said through clenched teeth.

"You did this to me?" Every word took effort.

"It was your father's idea."

She grunted as though she'd finally opened a jar lid, and something inside of me cracked apart.

No, it wasn't inside of my body, but deeper than that... in my very essence. With everything I had, I pushed in that direction, and Pandora stumbled back, her eyes widening. The pain instantly tapered off.

Then her eyes narrowed, and she straightened, recovering. "You'll be better off without your magic, girl. You're only a half-mage, and your magic alone will never amount to much. But if you give it to me..."

"No," I growled.

Inside me, my wolf paced, and my inner eye noticed lightning crackling along her fur.

"You bottled up my magic so you could take it later," I accused, my voice rough from the paralyzing pain she'd inflicted on me.

“No, I did it to protect you.” She waved a hand in exasperation, as if I was just a silly girl ungrateful for the favor she’d done for me. “Your mother and father were killed because wolves and mages are never meant to mix. They both carried the stigma, never fitting in with our people or hers. The Denraider pack hunted them down and killed them for creating an abomination — you.”

I glared at my aunt. “My parents are dead. Why would you dishonor your brother’s memory by hurting his child?”

Without answering, she raised her hand again, and I flinched with the memory of the pain she’d already inflicted. But this time, the pain eased into me like a dull ache... nothing worse than a bellyache assailed me.

She let out a sound of frustration, and I grinned. “What’s the matter, Auntie? Your magic’s no match for mine, huh? Guess I’m not the weakling you thought.”

“Stubborn girl. It seems I’ll need my coven’s help to unseal your magic, since you’re unwilling to surrender it to me.”

“Even if I knew how, I certainly wouldn’t give it to you, Auntie. You ruined my life!”

She scoffed dismissively. “You’re a pathetic half-breed. Your magic probably isn’t even worth taking.”

I crossed my arms. “Keep telling yourself that.”

Pandora shrugged, then raised a hand. “Unfortunately for you, it will stay locked away. Just when you need it most,” she taunted.

The air around us shimmered, and my heart fell along with the next illusion. This time, we remained on the same craggy path, but the loss of the illusion revealed a dozen wolves surrounding us.

I recognized them all too well. I’d watched these wolves run every full moon, leaving me behind. They’d shown me nothing but disdain on a daily basis, and a few of them had demonstrated that physically. They’d all helped chase me out

of Ironwood packlacks. And now, they were here to drag me back.

Two of them shifted back, and I stooped to grab the handgun, only to find it missing from the ground around me. I patted down my leg, wishing I'd stopped to strap on my trusty blade before I left, for all the good it would do me against this many wolves.

Someone beside me tsked, and I straightened up, refusing to let them see me lose hope. The wolf shifter set my gun on a waist-high boulder before pulling clothes out of his sling bag and slowly getting dressed. I seethed. Thanks to my aunt's illusion, I hadn't seen him walk right up and take my only weapon. I was even more annoyed when I recognized who he was.

Vaclar had been raised and groomed to become Luka's enforcer when he took over as pack alpha. I shouldn't have stood there gloating over my aunt's inability to drain my magic. I should've run. I should've screamed for those two wolves I foolishly chased off. I should've—

“Ready?”

The second wolf who'd shifted back had also gotten dressed. Yuriko flipped her hair over her shoulder without even giving me so much as a glance. Her question was addressed to Pandora.

As an alpha around Luka's age, Yuriko might have been a candidate for Luka's enforcer, except that Jameson had barred her way. Perhaps he'd been worried his son would fall for her instead of being married off for a pack alliance. Or maybe he was just a sexist bastard who didn't want to acknowledge female wolves could be as dominant as males.

“Yes, fine,” Pandora grumbled. “Get me out of here.”

“We'll be glad to,” Vaclar said, his eyes glittering with malice as he stared me down. “Just as soon as we deliver Luka's mate.”

“You're not taking me anywhere,” I said.

But then Pandora raised her hand again, and the world shook under my feet. I fell on my ass just before everything around me went black.

“Remember, Luka is not to kill her until I’ve reclaimed her magic.”

Vaclar’s dark chuckle sent ice through my veins, especially since I couldn’t see him. “Oh, I doubt he wants to kill her.”

For a moment, I thought I’d gone blind. Then everything else winked out, and I fell into the dark.

Chapter 37

Freya

I woke up with a massive headache in an unfamiliar bed. As I sat up, I held a hand to my temple. My heart raced when I caught movement at the side of the room, but the woman standing there just pounded on the door and said, “She’s awake.”

She was of the Ironwood pack, but my head hurt too much to remember her name.

The room was small, but the beautifully carved hardwood table near the bed told me I wasn’t in some crappy prison cell. Heavy drapes covered the small window, allowing only a small amount of light to leak in. I looked up and noticed a nice light fixture. The guard flipped on a light switch, and I blinked away spots in my vision before glaring at her. She returned my gaze steadily.

A few minutes later, the door opened. To my shock, Willow came in with a tray of food, which she sat on that nice hardwood table. She didn’t say a word to me, and I noticed fresh bruises peeking out of her threadbare clothes.

“Go,” my guard said, and Willow left.

But just before she did so, she glanced back at me with such a look of despair that it brought me to my feet. She shook her head as the door closed behind her.

“Eat,” the bossy guard told me.

I wanted to resist just to be disagreeable, but my stomach growled, and decided I should keep my strength up for

whatever happened next. Recognizing both my guard and Willow from Ironwood confirmed the pack had kidnapped me.

“Does Luka still plan to execute me?” I asked after I had a few bites and could slow down.

“I’m not privy to the pack alpha’s plans,” the guard grumbled.

I remembered she was a beta, but her name still alluded me. Something with a C, I thought. Cora? Clara? Crimson?

Then her words caught up to me. “Wait, when did Luka become the Ironwood pack alpha?”

“When Pack Alpha Jameson met an untimely end. Don’t pretend you know nothing about that.”

“I don’t.” I shrugged. Couldn’t say I was particularly sad about it, though.

When I was done eating, I got up and stretched, pacing back and forth on the other side of the small room from my grumpy guard. I thought about asking if they’d let Pandora go after she sold me out, but my guard probably wouldn’t answer me. Pandora had interrupted the pack alliance between Ironwood and Frost Fang, but now Nira was dead, and so was Jameson.

Which meant Luka was the only alpha left from that deal. Maybe now that the situation had changed, I could talk him out of executing me. After all, what would he stand to gain?

I whirled when the door opened suddenly. Luka stepped into the room.

“You can go, Carlyn,” he dismissed the guard.

My moment of triumph at remembering her name started with a C died when she closed the door behind her.

A shiver ran down my back. I didn’t want to be alone with Luka, my fake fated mate. The alpha who’d sent me to die in the wildlands when he rejected me.

“What do you want, Luka? Come to kill me yourself?”

He chuckled. “Hardly.” Then his gaze sharpened, and he used his alpha-bark. “Show me his bite.”

His alpha power washed over me without any weight to it, and I crossed my arms. He growled and stalked toward me, making me shy away from him. But there was nowhere to go. My wolf recoiled at the thought of him touching me. My back hit the wall, and his hand reached out and yanked the neck of my shirt aside to reveal Gage’s mark... and the strange mark below my collarbone. He scowled and stepped back.

“What the fuck, Freya?”

I turned my back on him to throw back the curtains of the small window for all the good it did me. I didn’t recognize the trees right outside, and I couldn’t see any other buildings. Deeper in the woods, I caught sight of a wolf on patrol.

Luka’s alpha presence filled the room behind me, tainting the very air I breathed. Being alone with him felt wrong. It made my skin crawl. Neither my wolf nor I wanted anything to do with him. To think I’d ever believed I might truly be his fated mate...

Deciding to take charge of the situation, I said, “You know our fated mate bond was fake, right? That bitch who delivered me to you set us up. You should probably think long and hard about why Pandora wanted to ruin a pack alliance between Ironwood and Frost Fang.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter now, does it? You and your new mate destroyed any chance of an alliance when you killed off Nira.”

His words dripped with disgust, but it was the most he’d ever said to me all at once.

I crossed my arms and looked anywhere but at him, trying not to shiver at the thought of him staring at Gage’s mark. Luka was an alpha, but he couldn’t hold a candle to Gage’s dominance. Luka’s power came from having Ironwood at his back, not from his own wolf.

“You know Nira only wanted to marry you so she could kill you and take both packs for herself.” I found myself

talking just to fill up the silence of the room. “She probably killed Jameson so there would be one less alpha in the way of her power. You’re both fools for believing she actually wanted an alliance.”

Luka’s chuckle surprised me. “All this talk of Nira makes me think you must be jealous. What’s the matter, Freya? Did the idea of her in my bed frustrate you? What would your new mate think?”

I faced him just so I could see his face when I threw his argument right back at him. “All this talk of Gage... What’s the matter, Luka? Are you jealous?”

Luka lunged forward, shoving me against the wall beside the window. His surprise attack left me unprepared, and the impact knocked the air from my lungs. When I inhaled, the reek of his breath filled my nostrils.

“How could you let him mark you, Freya? You’re meant to be mine.”

I put my hands on his chest and shoved him back. His eyes flickered with dangerous anger, but I didn’t care. I was angry, too.

“Didn’t you hear anything I said? Pandora cursed us — she faked the bond to ruin the pack alliance. We’re not fated mates.”

Luka growled as he started pacing. “I knew I shouldn’t have let her go.” Luka ran a hand through his hair, and his eyes fell to my neck again. “And that witch’s mark... Pandora’s your aunt. You’re half-witch, aren’t you?” When I didn’t answer, he scoffed. “I guess my father was right. You and I can’t reproduce after all.”

I blinked. His audacity left me for an utter lack of words.

“And that mark proves everything else you’ve said. No one else could leave a lasting mate mark on you if you truly were my fated mate.”

My mind latched on to the important part — the part that might help me get out of here.

“Exactly. We’re not mates, Luka. Nira’s dead. There’s no reason to keep me here. Just let me go, and I’ll convince Gage not to start a pack war.”

Luka snorted. “You’re right about one thing. Nira’s dead. It doesn’t matter what she thinks anymore. She was the one who wanted to kill you, not me.”

Then he stepped closer to me, forcing me to put distance between us. I hated having the wall at my back, but it was preferable to sharing space with Luka. Especially when his gaze dipped down to my lips. I suppressed a shudder of disgust — unwilling to let him think I feared him.

“I’m sorry for exiling you, Freya. I know these last few months can’t have been easy for you. But you’re back now, and...” His soft words pleaded for me to understand. I didn’t like where this was going.

When he raised a hand to my face, I snapped, “Don’t you dare touch me again.”

“I never stopped caring about you, Freya. I never—”

I laughed in his face. “Let’s not pretend you ever cared about me. You exiled me!”

“Only because my father had already decided it was that or kill you. I picked the better option. I gave you a chance to survive. And you took it, Freya! You proved how strong you are. You’re a worthy mate for an alpha of my caliber, and you know I always found you attractive—”

“You made me crawl on the ground in front of you and your friends!”

“That’s all in the past...” He tried approaching me again, but I sidled away before he could get too close.

“You watched while they beat me! More than once! You never helped me. As the next pack alpha, you could’ve put a stop to all of it!”

“Things are different now, Freya—”

I snorted my derision and waved at the door. “Really? I saw the bruises on Willow’s arms!”

“She deserved them for keeping you away from me,” he growled. “She and her worthless brother led us in circles, wasting precious time. We could’ve caught up to you before you reached Moonblessed packlands, except for the two of them. They led us on a wild goose chase, and we wasted days tearing Alloy apart looking for you. Luckily, a man named Marius wised up and told us something useful.”

I frowned, remembering the man Gage and Heath had talked to outside the cabin at Alloy. He’d been kind enough to rent us the place, but I hadn’t liked the way his eyes had followed me all the way inside. Still, I felt bad, wondering if Luka had ordered him to be tortured.

“Besides, Willow appreciates my mercy, considering her brother paid the ultimate price.”

My mouth fell open in shock. Was he saying what I thought... “Did you execute Wilder?”

The guys had feared that Willow and Wilder, as subordinate wolves, would cave under alpha commands. But Willow and Wilder apparently hadn’t led their packmates straight to us. They’d resisted — at least for a little while. That’s why Ironwood hadn’t caught up to us until later.

“Was that his name?” Luka shrugged. “He was never worthy of you, Freya. And neither is this guy.”

He gestured toward Gage’s mark, but I was still processing the fact that Luka had killed my childhood sweetheart. It didn’t matter that Wilder had abandoned me when he realized I couldn’t shift. It didn’t matter that it had been Willow’s idea to warn me that Ironwood intended to execute me, not his. He hadn’t deserved to die.

“You’re just like your father,” I accused. “You don’t give a shit about your packmates. You abuse your power.”

Luka stepped back, staring at me in surprise, as though he’d never expected me to talk back. Maybe the old Freya never would have. When I lived on Ironwood packlands, I’d learned the hard way that it was better to do as I was told than to suffer another beating. I’d never imagined escaping from

Ironwood to live free of them. I'd never imagined finding a place I belonged.

The realization struck me like a lightning bolt.

Two pack alphas wanted to make me theirs. But where Luka was selfish, cruel, and abusive, Gage was selfless, protective, and a true leader. He cared about his pack. And he never acted like a tyrant, like he was better than his own packmates. He treated Heath and Flint like equals — something I'd never seen another alpha do.

The deal I'd made with the Howling Echo pack had made me feel used, and when Gage had bitten me, I'd felt less-than. Like I was just his property, powerless, his to do with as he pleased.

And yet, when I looked back, I remembered how they'd treated me just before my heat began. They'd ignored the deal entirely to make sure I felt as safe and comfortable as possible, getting my consent before the heat took away my ability to say no.

Even though I couldn't shift, they brought me into their pack and treated me like a true packmate, even mid-battle against Frost Fang. When I'd gone back to try to help Gage, Heath and Flint hadn't tried to stop me. They'd followed me, backing me up like packmates should. Remembering how proud Gage had been suffused my body with strength and self-confidence all over again, even here in my prison, surrounded by enemies once more.

Gage had claimed me as his, but when I fought back against everything that entailed, he didn't get physically or verbally abusive like Luka would have. Gage gave me space and then showed me he would never take away my freedom to choose. He sent Heath to prove his intentions to me, regardless of how uncomfortable he must have been from the resulting celebration. Gage had made a mistake in biting me, but he'd wanted to make amends.

Luka wouldn't even admit what an asshole he'd been.

There was no question which pack I belonged in. The Howling Echo had earned my eternal loyalty, and, threatened by my fake fated mate, I now realized the truth. Gage, Flint, and Heath were so much more than just packmates to me. They were my mates.

Why had it taken me so long to realize it?

“You’re not my pack alpha, Luka,” I growled, stepping toward him.

Inside me, my wolf snarled. She snapped at the edges of whatever prison kept her locked away inside of me as surely as I was locked inside this room.

“I could be,” Luka said in a firm voice that practically screamed ‘Be reasonable.’

He held his ground, and I held his gaze, showing him I would never be treated as worthless again.

“We can mark over your pack mark and give you the one you should have had all along.” He gestured toward my wrist. “And in ten days, on the Hunter’s Moon, you can reject the one who dared mark you as his mate. We’ll have the wedding ceremony that night, and together, we’ll become the Ironwood Alpha Pair. The whole pack is already expecting it.”

How ironic. Luka and Nira had planned to join their two packs together under the auspicious light of the full moon known as the Hunter’s Moon. Now he wanted to claim me under it.

“No.”

The word seemed to echo in the small room, gaining power as it did. I’d never before realized how much power that one, simple word could have. And I never would have without Flint, Heath, and Gage.

“I finally know my place, and it’s not with you or with the Ironwood pack. I’ve already chosen my pack, and they’ve chosen me.”

“Freya,” Luka’s eyes filled with pity. “I understand. Desperate times call for desperate measures, and I don’t blame

you for what you did while you were banished. But—”

I shook my head as he spoke. “Before my heat, I thought I had no choice but to accept their protection, but as soon as that was over, I was free to choose. The Moonblessed pack would have accepted me — the pack you threatened. Their territory is a lovely place, governed by an honorable alpha pair. I would have been happy there. But I knew then and I know now where I belong — with the Howling Echoing pack.”

Luka snorted. “Does your tiny little pack even exist now? All three of your so-called packmates originally came from Frost Fang. They’ve gone home, just like you should. Why would they want a half-breed outsider like you?”

His sneering tone made it clear he was running out of patience with playing the concerned alpha. A few weeks ago, his words might have shaken my confidence. But now I wore Gage’s mate mark, and Heath and Flint had shown me they cared about me in spite of it. I had all the proof I needed that they wanted me as much as I wanted them.

So, I raised my chin and let my gaze meet Luka’s, unafraid.

“You’re confused, Luka. You see, you kidnapped a Howling Echo wolf. And now nothing can save you. This is the end for you.”

I smiled as fear filled his eyes, just before he managed to replace it with his usual bravado. He backed off, going to the door.

“The Howling Echo isn’t here to save you,” he said, his voice unsteady.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I said. “Because *I* am here, and I am Howling Echo.”

Luka knocked on the inside of the door. “Keep her here until I call for her,” Luka told the guards.

My wolf snarled and growled inside of me, thirsty for Luka’s blood. I may have been the prisoner here, but I’d never felt stronger standing up to an Ironwood pack bully. Even though he was the pack alpha.

“It’s too late,” I warned him. “You never should have brought me here.”

“I’ll give you the chance to change your mind,” Luka called as he stepped across the threshold.

“I won’t,” I swore. “I’ll never belong to you. I belong with the Howling Echo. And I can’t wait to make you bleed.”

Chapter 38

Gage

I woke up with a start to find sun streaming in directly onto my face. I rolled over with a groan, realizing I hadn't moved once the entire night. My arm tingled and I stretched.

The moment my pack bonds and the mate bond crashed into me, I realized how out of it I must've been. Flint was still asleep, but Heath was up and about. So was Freya... and she felt... off.

I supposed that was to be expected, considering everything she was dealing with. Heath, Flint, and I had plenty of time to come to terms with our new situation with Frost Fang while she was unconscious. She still had that to contend with, along with the new mate bond.

I got dressed, filled with a new resolve to see this through. I'd given Freya her space, and I'd done some thinking of my own. Now we needed to try to move forward... together.

Maybe if I told her she could have Flint and Heath bite her, too, that would reassure her? But Heath was right, we didn't know if it would even work... And I remembered how upset she'd been about her privacy. If someone else did form a second mate bond with her, she would have even *less* privacy. It would give more men a window into her inner turmoil, but do nothing to lessen it.

Guilt filled me, and I knew it was time to apologize. To her, for doing this without her consent. To them, for creating an imbalance between us.

As I headed for our den, I wondered if this was what it meant to be pussy whipped. My younger self never would've

entertained the idea of sharing his mate with anyone. But I couldn't deny how natural it felt. And with my new responsibilities as pack alpha of a much larger pack... it actually calmed me to know that Freya was with the others.

I jerked to a halt when I realized she *wasn't* with the others just now. I sensed the distance growing between us. And as pack alpha of a pack that actually had packlands... I sensed it when she left. Had she decided to run and leave us behind?

Mate. Danger! My wolf warned inside my mind.

Panic filled me as I raced toward the den. The only thing that reassured me was that she didn't feel angry or upset. She felt... curious? And definitely wary. So what had my wolf sensed that I hadn't?

Sensation tickled along the back of my mind, making me feel like Freya was looking for me through the mate bond... Which shouldn't be possible, since it was one-sided.

I burst through the den's front door just as echoes of pain lanced through the mate bond. Doubling over in shock and shared pain, I must have made some sound, because Flint appeared at my side. My vision cleared — I hadn't even realized it had grown dark at the edges until then.

My wolf went absolutely insane inside me, demanding I go after her immediately. We should howl and call the pack on a hunt with us, he insisted.

My spine stretched to give me a tail, and I fought for control like never before. It took all my effort not to shift. Because right now, I knew I needed my human side. My wolf's instincts alone wouldn't be enough to rescue Freya from whoever had done this to her.

"What happened, Gage?" Flint put a hand on my shoulder, steadying me as I straightened.

"Freya's in danger," I rasped, the aftereffects of pain still lingering.

I tugged on my pack bond to Heath, calling him to me.

“Can you sense where she is?” Flint let out a growl of frustration. “She told me to go back to sleep. I thought she was just getting up to go pee or get some breakfast or something.”

“You didn’t hear her leave?” I asked.

“No...” Flint sounded wary. “And two wolves were assigned to watch her.”

He left in search of those wolves as I tried to compose myself and assure my wolf we would leave as soon as I talked to Heath. I waited outside a moment longer, and Heath rushed across the distance between the pack house and our den.

“What happened? Is Freya okay?”

Clearly I’d sent plenty of my own anxiety down the pack bond when I’d summoned him. I rubbed my forehead, still sensing a dull ache of pain coming from Freya.

“She’s in danger and in pain,” I explained. “She left Frost Fang packlands. I have to go after her. No one can keep me from her.”

My voice roughened as my vocal cords partially shifted.

It was a statement of fact. Without a pack, alphas went rogue and sometimes lost all control, giving over to their wolf’s instincts. But a pack alpha on a rampage, with his mate in danger? No one could stop me if I went feral.

Heath put his hands on my shoulders and stared into my eyes, forcing me to focus. His voice was steady, calm with a deadly rage.

“Can you sense if anyone is with her?”

The pain had been so... non-specific. Which meant...

“Someone hurt her,” I growled in answer. “With magic.”

“Fuck,” Heath’s gaze sharpened. If looks could kill, his would have. “You need to rally Frost Fang’s warriors. We’ll need backup if we’re going up against a coven of witches.”

“Right.”

Even though I agreed with his point, it wasn't just my wolf that wanted to chase after her right now. My wolf nearly broke free, pushing himself to the surface once more.

“Gage,” Heath warned, no doubt seeing my eyes turning gold.

I'd never hated being pack alpha so much as right now. If I were any other wolf, nothing could stop me from charging after my mate right now. But only I could do what needed to be done — only I could call on the cavalry to save her.

“Swear that we'll get her back,” I growled, barely holding on.

“We will. And whoever kidnapped her will pay; I swear it. But you gotta bring the rest of the pack down on these fuckers. And to do that, you need to keep your shit together.”

He was right. We might need an army at our backs if we were about to go up against a coven of witches. I would do what was necessary to save Freya, even if I had to fight every instinct driving me to chase her down myself this very instant.

“Kill them all,” I growled, heading for the pack house.
“Go!”

I glanced back in time to see two massive alpha wolves charging through the forest with two smaller betas behind them. Flint must have found the wolves who were supposed to be on guard.

Pride filled me, and my wolf calmed down a little. I truly believed in Flint and Heath's abilities. They would protect her to their very last breath until I arrived with our old pack at my back. Then we would destroy everyone who ever harmed her, just as I'd promised.

Summoning my authority, I reached down the pack bond, touching more minds than I'd ever imagined being bound to. All of these people were now depending on me to set things right. But none of that mattered right now. All I cared about was making sure Freya was safe.

On an inhale, I sent the summons down every single pack bond, including Freya's. On an exhale I sent the full weight of

my will to the pack. My silent alpha command. Only my three enforcers would be strong enough to resist — Flint, Heath, and Rowan.

By the time I summoned all the wolves, explained that witches had taken my mate, and told them to follow me, Freya had been knocked unconscious. That only hastened my desire to run to her, but I knew better than to take the entire pack. I had to set up a border patrol and leave enough wolves behind to defend packlands in case this was some kind of trap leading to invasion.

By the time I gave all the Frost Fang wolves their new assignments — mostly broken up by towns so they could work together as teams — I was mentally exhausted. But my wolf urged me on, anxious to rush into battle to save my mate.

Just then, my phone rang. It was Rowan. As I answered it, I also noticed a new message waiting for me.

“I’m already on my way,” Rowan growled in my ear. “No need to yank my chain.”

“I summoned every wolf I could, not just you.” I hastily caught him up on the situation. “We all need to do whatever it takes to save her.”

“She’s your mate,” he said flatly. “Of course you say that.”

“I know, Rowan, but her safety is all I can think about right now. If we lose her...”

I didn’t explain that losing her would not only incapacitate me, but also Flint and Heath. There was too much to explain right now, and not enough time to explain it.

“You bit her, so you can sense where she is, yeah?”

“To an extent.”

I closed my eyes, preparing to push my awareness along the mate bond. Then I remembered that message waiting for me. Maybe Heath and Flint had caught up to her already.

“Hold on,” I told Rowan.

When I read Heath’s message, ice filled my veins.

“Flint and Heath are trailing her. Her kidnappers knocked her out and gave her to her old packmates. They’re taking her straight to their packlands, back to Ironwood.”

“A pack where we have no connections,” Rowan growled. “Of course.”

“This means pack war,” I breathed, my eyes turning to the wolves milling around the throne, waiting to follow my lead.

They raised their heads and howled, a sound filled with confidence. No one hesitated. If their pack alpha called for war, he would have it. The thought filled me with dread. Their howl echoed through the throne room, a parody of my chosen pack name.

When the sound died, Rowan’s low voice filled my ear.

“It doesn’t have to.” He knew me better than any of my old Frost Fang packmates. He’d sensed the horror in my words.

Pack war weakened both packs, leaving no true victor. Half of Frost Fang might die, simply because they followed me.

“Threaten war,” Rowan suggested, “but you’re the distraction. Meanwhile, I’ll infiltrate the Ironwood pack and find your mate.”

“You’ve never met her.”

“I will know her by the pack mark... and your mate mark.”

Rowan’s confidence inspired my own. If anyone could find her, it would be Rowan. He was the best tracker I knew. He’d spent more time as a wolf than anyone else. I couldn’t think of a worthier, more capable wolf to hunt down those responsible for kidnapping my mate.

“Find her, Rowan.”

“I will. It’s time I meet Freya.”

— — —

To be continued in Rejected Wolf Pack Book 3!

Find out if her pack arrives in time in the next book, *Untamed Shifters*, at this link:

so.TraciLovelot.com/readRWP3

Can't wait to meet Rowan?

On the way to rescue her, he dreams of Freya's wolf...
Read this bonus epilogue when you get my weekly emails
here:

so.TraciLovelot.com/RWP2signup

Remember how Freya dreamed of Rowan during her heat?

See the dream from his perspective, plus find out how he
spent those five long days... Visit Patreon.com/TraciLovelot
for more Rejected Wolf Pack bonus stories!

Turn the page for previews and backstage secrets!

Untamed Shifters

Preview Rejected Wolf Pack Book 3: *Untamed Shifters*

“This is Freya,” Flint told the dark wolf. “Our newest packmate.”

I’d dreamed of this wolf with black fur, but that hadn’t prepared me to meet him. Blood coated his face, matting his fur. He was even more imposing and intimidating in real life.

He’d already left a trail of bodies in his wake. With one bite of his massive jaws, he could tear my head from my shoulders.

“Don’t be afraid,” Heath told me.

The pack bond also flared with reassurances, as though Gage, too, wanted to make me feel safe, even from a distance.

But I wasn’t afraid. My wolf recognized the dark wolf as her packmate. My mind recognized him from my dreams. And my heart ached to know him.

His name felt so familiar as it fell from my lips, “Rowan.”

— — —

Rowan will play a major role throughout the third book!

Continue this reverse harem (RH) series at:

so.TraciLovelot.com/readRWP3

What's Next

Thanks for stepping deeper into this world of wolf shifters!

The Dark Potion restaurant named in this book was inspired by my favorite sandwich shop in Oaxaca City in Mexico, called Oscuro Brebaje. As soon as I heard the name, my imagination went wild. Nope, the real-life restaurant is nothing like the restaurant described in the book, but names are hard, okay?

Discover more backstage secrets in my weekly email updates at:

so.TraciLovelot.com/newsletter

[.{Stay in touch}.](#)

Ready for something different?

Meet Mel, a badass vampire hunter who will break all the rules for three seductive vampires.

Read Mel's Vampire Coven, a complete RH trilogy, at:

so.TraciLovelot.com/readMVC

Want to know when more Traci Lovelot books arrive?

Follow me on [Amazon](#), [Bookbub](#), or [Goodreads](#) to get an email alert every time I publish new Why Choose romance books!

Turn the page for more previews!

Mel's Vampire Coven

An excerpt from Mel's Vampire Coven

The vampire's gaze snapped up to my face. "Put your hands back up where I had them."

I whimpered with sudden need as his big palms pushed my thighs apart. His kisses crept lower, his breath tantalizing me.

Then he looked up at me again. "I won't ask again, little witch."

I raised my hands over my head, twining my fingers together as I grew more and more excited.

He pushed my legs open again, kissing his way up my thigh. I groaned as his breath teased my core.

"So impatient." He smirked up at me. "I haven't even bitten you yet."

— — —

Sink your fangs into this complete reverse harem trilogy on Amazon or in Kindle Unlimited at this link:

so.TraciLovelot.com/readMVC

Our Fae Queen

An excerpt from *Our Fae Queen*, Traci Lovelot's debut reverse harem series with polyamory themes

His hand slipped between my thighs. "You've done enough today. Now let me take care of you."

I gasped as his fingers spread me, one teasing along between my folds. His smile widened knowingly. Capable fingers stroked me, and I balled my fist into the blankets beneath me.

When a finger dipped inside me, I gasped again and grabbed his arm as if to anchor myself in reality, looking down to where his hand disappeared into my clothing. His hand stilled, but remained where it was.

He raised his eyebrows, waiting. "Shall I continue?"

"Yes," I whispered, but it ended in a desperate groan.

His inquisitive expression melted into another knowing smile as his finger delved eagerly back inside me. I tilted my hips, urging him on as his fingers found all the right spots. He smiled down at me as though there were nowhere else he'd rather be at this moment.

"Take all the time you need," he whispered, stroking me to greater and greater heights. "I won't stop until you're done."

— — —

Our Fae Queen is now a complete RH series. Read the first three fantasy romance books in this discounted box set!

so.TraciLovelot.com/readOFQA

Find the final three books of this complete series here:

so.TraciLovelot.com/readOFQB

Our Fae Queen is a slow-burn and slow-build series set in a totally different universe filled with five kinds of Fae.

Available on Amazon or in Kindle Unlimited. Paperbacks also available at:

www.amazon.com/dp/B094SH8J6K?binding=paperback

Snowed in with Shifters

Read this FREE novella when you get my email updates!

— — —

When an early winter storm leaves us stranded, I'm trapped inside with my mate... and his two brothers.

I've always dreamed of mating an alpha, but when the pack run reveals a fellow beta as my mate, I'm overjoyed to have found my mate at last.

Things get complicated when I'm snowed in with him... and both of his equally hot brothers.

One of them is an alpha, but truthfully, I feel drawn toward all three. With my mate's enthusiastic approval, we all explore our budding feelings while waiting for the storm to pass.

But wolves mate in pairs.

When the snow finally thaws, will any of our hearts survive?

— — —

Read this standalone reverse harem novella with guaranteed HEA at:

so.TraciLovelot.com/readRWPN

About Traci Lovelot

Addicted to stories without love triangles, **Traci Lovelot** writes reverse harem fantasy romance books where our leading lady lives happily ever after... with ALL the guys. Because why choose? Her characters love without limits in fantasy worlds that overlap ours.

Traci is a polyamorous nomad who splits her time between wandering our wondrous world and spending time with her polycule.

Find out more about Traci Lovelot on her [website](#).

— — —

Traci is the author of these reverse harem series and standalones

[Our Fae Queen](#)

(complete series)

[Demon Hunter Academy](#)

(standalone novel)

[Mel's Vampire Coven](#)

(complete series)

[Snowed in with Shifters](#)

(standalone novella)

[Rejected Wolf Pack](#)

(more coming soon!)

— — —

You can always email her at author@TraciLovelot.com — she loves to hear from readers!

She'd be honored to see her books on your virtual bookshelves over at [Bookbub](#) and [Goodreads](#). Leaving a short review on either of those sites or [Amazon](#) would mean a lot to her. Thank you!

Spread the word, so Traci can keep writing more RH books for you!

— — —

Read exclusive Rejected Wolf Pack bonus content

Read all my books and bonus content EARLY, and get backstage secrets and more when you join my Patreon community.

Patreon members can also always request more bonus content from any book I write!

Every month you'll get great stuff like Early Releases (read my books BEFORE they're published), bonus stories, and work-in-progress chapters of the book I'm writing right now!

After you join, send me a message with your request, or comment on any of my Patreon posts.

Learn about Patreon at:

so.TraciLovelot.com/patreon-coming-soon

Acknowledgments

This may have been my favorite book to write so far!

Special thank you to everyone following Freya's story week by week on Patreon. That's where I share in-progress chapters, backstage secrets, and the Patreon Early Release ebooks, which you can read on your favorite device. I'd love to see you there!

Big thanks to my Patreon True Loves, who help me keep going as well as covering some of the costs involved in making this book. Thank you Ellie, Kat Trocha, Amanda Peterman, Kris Kenney, and Erin Cooper! You rock!

Special thanks to all the wonderful people who helped me name this huge cast of characters. For the new characters in this book specifically, thanks goes to Leigh Spoonie, Clare Harrison, Katrina DeHart, Marilyn Carlene Burgess, and Rochelle Renee! See Book 1 for more.

Huge thanks as always to my Patreon community and my reader team for helping me iron out issues. In order by when they finished reading: Bina, Traci Bell, Fiona Hots, Sarah Hills, Kim Wiz, Debbie Mayne, Cristin C., Mali Bordelon, Kris Kenney, Katie, Angie, Charlie Foley-Friend, Jessica Ghobrial, and Leigh Spoonie. You have forever changed the world of Rejected Wolf Pack!

Hugs and big thanks to Scott, KJ, Colby and Jessica, ELF, Josie, Chris, my mom, and my siblings, for giving me the space to focus on writing and editing this book while I'm living my nomadic dream!

My love to you all!

Read future books as I write them and get the final ebooks EARLY by joining my Patreon community here:

www.patreon.com/TraciLovelot

Copyright & Attributions

Copyright © 2024 Traci Lovelot

Published by Worldbinding Books

All rights reserved. This book is licensed for your individual use only. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means without prior written permission, except for the use of brief quotations in book reviews.

This novel is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, businesses, locales, organizations, events, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used in a fictitious manner or for atmospheric purposes. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to businesses, companies, events, institutions, or locales is completely coincidental.

Cover art by Miblar getpremade.com

Editing by ELF and proofreading by KJ